SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC LEARNING OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS PARTICIPATING IN AN ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAM

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DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK
2007
ABSTRACT
This qualitative case study documented, described and analyzed the experiences of 51 students voluntarily enrolled in a Progressive Alternative Education Program (PAEP). The study explored participants' perceptions towards learning (social and academic) as they participated in the PAEP. A variety of data sources facilitated in depth exploration of the research questions, including a survey of the participants’ perceptions of school and learning, recording extensive field notes during the various components of the PAEP, focus groups and individual interviews (these, and daily activities of PAEP were audio-taped and transcribed). The data was analyzed to uncover patterns in perceptions about learning and to document changes in these perceptions over the academic year. It is noteworthy that each participant, by the end of the study, indicated that their perception of themselves as learners and as active participants in learning had evolved. Four hypothesis were generated by this study: (1) Learners who perceive their academic courses as being pertinent to their personal goals are more likely to persist in the achievement of these goals, (2) When students explicitly connect classroom experiences and “real world” experiences, student motivation is enhanced and understanding is greatly aided. When these connections are unclear or disregarded,
students may disengage from academic studies, (3) Students who are disengaged from academic studies may be re-engaged when participating in a community that they see as valid and valuable. Students who are engaged in academic studies may find deeper cognitive and motivational connections if they connect to an active and engaged community of learners, and (4) Giving opportunities to develop personal goals, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, and resiliency requires allowing students to direct their own path, and, at times, to make mistakes. Further research is suggested regarding the following areas: examining long term affects of participation in secondary PAEP, empirical testing of the hypothesis of allowing students to direct their learning and to make mistakes, studies in comparison PAEP wherein students are mandated to attend, as well as studies in public school settings that take a progressive approach but serve all students in the community (as opposed to a select population).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank the staff and students of the program I studied. Their willingness to open their doors and lives to me, so that I may further understand the process of teaching and learning, was unparalleled. The student’s enthusiasm towards taking a metacognitive approach to their lives and studies, and the staff’s willingness to allow me access to their daily interactions highlights the programs’ dedication to authentic instruction.

Next, I want to thank my administrators and colleagues in the Ossining School District who supported me over the course of my studies. I also need to thank my sister and brother, Toni and Mario, for their constant support in all facets of this endeavor. On many levels this could not have been achieved without them.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my parents, who taught me, among so many valuable life lessons, the art and necessity of dreams and of perseverance (and who often received object lessons in perseverance from me).
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Nannie and to my nieces.

Nannie's passion for life brought infinite laughter and precious memories. She inspired those of us that knew her to seek out goodness, to move through the world with a style all our own, and to leave the earth better than we found it. I teach because of all she taught me. I hope I made you proud, Nan.

Elaina and Juliana, you have been so patient. You inspire me to live and teach the best that I can. I hope I will always make you proud.
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Adolescence is considered a preparation period for becoming an adult member of society. This period is often buzzing with many exciting and life changing discoveries: of self, of relationships, of society, and of all of the structures and interactions that encompass these. Perhaps the most refreshing aspect about working with young people is that there really is something new under the sun. In fact, for adolescents, almost everything; every thought, every experience, can be new and exciting, can be a positive learning experience when they are encouraged to explore their world. Dewey (1897) touched on this type of active and engaged learning: “The child’s own instincts and powers furnish the materials and give the starting point for all education” (p. 77). Dewey further explained that with the advent of industry in his time it was not possible to tell what the future would look like. Today, we can parallel the advances in technology to the advances in industry of Dewey’s time. Modern educators find themselves with the task of preparing students for the future unknown. In order to do this, educators following Dewey’s ideas attempt to help students gain a sense of command over themselves to: use all of their capabilities, fill their physical and mental toolboxes, and hone their skill of judgment and their ability to work economically and efficiently. In order to effectively provide such an education,
educators following Dewey’s ideology, consider each student’s “powers, tastes, and interests” (p. 77). A “one size fits all” approach is not well matched to these goals.

Statement of the Problem

America’s schools have come under attack for ill-preparing our students for the workforce or college. In 1990, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) published a report that stated that “the educational performance of those students who become front line workers in this country is well below the average performance of their counterparts in some newly industrializing low wage countries” (NCEE, 1990, p. 43). The report goes on to say that the system of rewards for performance produce minimal effort on behalf of non-college bound graduates. A 1991 Harris Poll indicated that students were ill-prepared for the workforce, and that approximately three quarters of the university educators polled felt that graduates had limited ability to concentrate, and had poor study and work skills (Harris, 1991, p. A3). It seems that there is not much external enticement for students to excel: the cultures of both America’s schools and workplace undermine academic achievement (Neumann, 1994).

The senior year of high school is often a year of transition. Many students have, at this point, part membership in childhood and part in adulthood, though typically they are fully included in neither. These youth are expected to work towards educational and vocational goals and take on new responsibilities, but are still often required to follow the directives of the adults in their lives (parents, guardians, and teachers). In addition to this ambiguous position, many students struggle to achieve developmental goals, and become disconnected from the
mainstream of society and of their schools (Keegan, 2006; Otis, Grouzet, Pelletier, 2005; Zweig, 2003). Other students may find themselves disconnected because types of goals they have established for themselves alienate them from the mainstream. Both groups are particularly vulnerable. The disconnection that they experience may cause them to become disenfranchised from society as a whole. These students find themselves misaligned with the protocols and structures of traditional schools, and often need intervention to meet their academic, social, or other needs, and to help them prepare for their futures (Pedder, McIntyre, 2006; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Many alternative programs have been established to meet the needs of these disconnected youth. Unfortunately, there are not enough alternatives available for the vast number of students who are in need of this individualized approach (Zweig, 2003). In their extensive examination of alternative learning programs, Reimer and Cash (2003) examine how the alternative programs that exist can best meet the needs of students and be effectively integrated into regular school systems. A part of the answer can be found in examining what alternative schools are actually doing, and what the students in those schools find to be advantageous over their other school experiences.

This qualitative study examined cognition and motivation as realized by high school students in one progressive alternative education program. This was examined through students’ self-reflection, and their interactions with their peers, instructors, and other individuals related to the program. As this group progressed towards full membership in adult society, the study documented their interactions and attempted to understand evolving phenomena in the school context, such as sense of self,
motivation, self-efficacy, empowerment, and inter- and intrapersonal relationships. Qualitative research pursues the interpretations of the subjects studied (Erickson, 1986). While this may be altered to some degree by the researcher’s perceptions, at their best such studies provide a rich description of the participants. Stake (1995) emphasized that the case study requires researchers to learn all about the case, to its boundaries, in the effort to identify its patterns and track its issues. This approach was of particular use for the purposes of this study, in that the particular phenomenon studied may have affect and been affected by many areas in students’ lives.

**Research Questions**

The following questions will guide the research:

1. What are the contexts in which students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
2. What do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
3. How do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
4. Why do students in a progressive alternative learning program make the decisions and choices they make?

Numerous theories have informed the design of this project.

**Theoretical Rationale**

In 1996, the New York Department of Education and the Board of Regents approved a new set of learning standards for New York State students (New York State Education Department, 1996). This revision of the essence of learning in New York (revised standards, curriculum, and assessments) was done to provide students with what they “should know, understand and be able to do as a result of their
schooling” (New York State Education Department, 1996). The goal of such change is to prepare students to be productive members of society; and to help them have ample opportunity and desire to thrive intellectually, financially, personally, and socially. This goal incorporates the cognitive-intellectual development of students with the social, inter-, and intra- personal development of students. While the terminology and approach may be new, the basic tenets are not much different from those that Dewey, on the cusp of the twentieth century, published in his renowned proclamation, *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), regarding the meaning and purpose of American education. In this decree he explained that the education of an individual grows from that individual’s participation in a society. He further stated that since his contemporaries could not tell what the future would look like, due to the exponential growth of technology, it was not the role of education to train students in mechanized labor or prepare them for a particular set of conditions. Instead he advocated for the need to prepare students to be able to use all of their capacities (mental and physical), exercise sound judgment of reason towards the tasks at hand, and use their physical, mental, and intellectual abilities in the most effective and efficient ways possible. Dewey recognized that students were individuals with different learning styles and skills. He encouraged educators to dispose of the factory approach to schooling (characterized by the ideas of one size fits all and students as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge of their teachers) in favor of a more progressive approach (Reimer & Cash, 2003).

What Dewey saw and put forth regarding the education of America’s youth at the advent of the industrial revolution is no less true today: we still face the intensely
changing needs of our society. As the dawn of the twentieth century brought the industrial revolution, so the dawn of the twenty-first century brings the technological revolution (Fitzgerald, 2002). As in the previous century, advancements in technology make it difficult to imagine a finite set of skills that would suffice in preparing students for the lives they will live. In modern society individuals must have the ability to interact, problem solve, collaborate, and practice forward thinking (Coles, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2002). It is the responsibility of public and private K-12 schools to move students along the path towards this end, particularly towards the later years of high school. It is in these years that the students begin to make the transition to adulthood and all that term holds in society (college, employment, responsibility, freedom, et cetera) (Reimer & Cash, 2003; Zweig, 2003).

The purpose of this theoretical rationale is to underline the need for research into the perceptions of learners about learning, motivation, and productivity. I will first examine theories of cognition (learning), and then I will explore the theories of motivation that influence educational approaches. From there I will examine historically the establishment of traditional education and the evolution of progressive education. Finally, I will review some alternatives to traditional educational.

Cognition

One of the goals of this study is to examine the perceptions students have regarding their cognitive processes. An examination of the metacognitive awareness of learners helps to understand what they know, what they believe they can do, and what motivates them, all of which influences what they do (Bandura, 1997; Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, & Pressley, 1990; Paris & Winograd, 1990). In this
context, learning relates to the assimilation of new knowledge into a learner’s current schemata, or understanding of the world. Learning incorporates both the integrating of basic and complex information into evolving schemata, and developing questioning and reasoning abilities to critically analyze and explore the information being processed. The manifestation of learning is production, which refers to what results after new information is incorporated to existing schemata. According to Dewey (1897), students need to be prepared not only to think, but to produce with the knowledge and thought that they have acquired. This second component of cognition incorporates the actions and products that result from what the learner has learned. For the purpose of this study, the terms productive and productivity are used to indicate actions that result in some output that is deemed valuable to the students in the study. The product may be tangible or intangible, such as a high SAT score, a piece of writing or research, a successful internship, any other concrete item, a friendship, a new understanding, clearer goals, or any other nonmaterial item.

Cognition, or learning, is perceived by many to be a sociocultural event: our minds are embedded in society (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Gardner, 1991; Gee, 2000, Heath, 1983, 1989, Sergiovanni, 1996, Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). If we are guided by this assumption, learning and cognitive development result from sociocultural interactions. In the view of modern society interaction and interdependence are perceived as the way to survive; commerce, socialization, and learning rely on awareness of and interaction with others and society. A growing awareness of social structures is an important product of learning, and such awareness furthers one’s cognitive growth (Heath, 1983; Munoz, 2005).
In his social development theory Vygotsky (1978) articulated the need for growth and learning to be scaffolded: prior knowledge connected to new knowledge. According to Vygostsky, this can best be done within the zone of proximal development: the area between what is known and what is to be known. By creating such a scaffold, new information is connected to existing frames of reference and understanding, thus making the learning real, connected, sensible, and of importance to the learner. Vygotsky (1986) further put forth that language is the primary mediator of knowledge for humanity. Infants make noise and through interactions with others, learn that the noises have meaning, thus noises become language. They then use sound and language to communicate and learn the meanings communicated through language. As this knowledge grows, children begin to use language to help themselves solve problems, and the sequence of learning continues. The relationship is one of ongoing interaction between mental development and social interaction. It is a spiraling process.

According to Vygotsky (1986), there are two types of concept attainment that occur: that which takes place in the formal school setting and that which takes place in the practical experiences of learners. When concepts are developed in the former, he calls them scientific, in that they are systematic, generalizable, and detached from the concrete experience of individuals. The latter he defines as spontaneous, in that they are situational, empirical, and practical. He further indicates that scientific concepts, when provided to students in the zone of their proximal development (the area in which they are able to bridge current knowledge to new learning), fine tune and make conscious the learning and knowledge base that is established.
spontaneously. Under this guide, schooling seeks to bridge the two modes of concept attainment so that students experience, acquire, and develop social and academic knowledge. This ties in with Piaget's constructs of teaching and learning.

Piaget (1972) believed that as the learner develops and interacts with the world, knowledge is invented and reinvented. Central to his theory of learning and thinking is the idea that the participation of the learner is key. Knowledge cannot be "given" verbally, lectures do not equal learning. It is essential for the learner to construct and reconstruct knowledge in accordance with what she or he already knows. For a child to understand and create knowledge of the world, the child must act on something. It is the action which supplies understanding of what is acted upon (Sigel & Cocking, 1977). In this theory, the learner is not filled with data; the learner is active in acquiring knowledge. Accordingly, we cannot cause others to learn, rather, we can provide the environment in which learners can interact and grow.

These theories inform a constructivist approach to cognitive development. In constructivism, a learner's prior knowledge (schemata, mental maps, and models) is built upon by selecting and transforming data, assembling hypotheses, and making decisions. The cognitive structure then grows and the cycle continues. In constructivism, learning is a quest for meaning, and the desire to know is the motivation for learning (Bruner, 1966). Therefore, the end goal of learning is not to know the right answer; it is to understand how, why, or what something is, in relationship to the learner. Constructivists posit that people learn to learn as they learn. Each meaning that is learned assists the learner in understanding other things.
Based in this idea that learning builds upon what is already known, Bruner (1986) brings to the constructivist concept of cognition the idea that social and cultural capital greatly influence the constructs students have. According to Bourdieu (1986), capital refers to resources that can be tangible (monetary) or intangible (nonmonetary). Social capital is determined by the combined actual and potential resources a person has access to through membership in her/his variety of social networks, and how successfully (read: quickly and effectively) one is able to access these resources. Cultural capital is a collection of non economic forces (family background, social class, investments in and commitment to education, and other resources) that influence academic success (Bourdieu, 1986). While this will be further discussed in the next sections, it is important to note here because the breadth and depth of social and cultural capital students have informs their existing schemata. This impacts their ability to scaffold new information to old. One’s experiences and interactions with social networks and cultural entities influence the connections one makes while encountering new information (Pedder & McIntyre, 2006).

The ideas discussed above all describe cognitive growth as an interactive, cyclical process, where new knowledge is tied to existing knowledge. This differs somewhat from a behaviorist approach to knowledge acquisition. Behaviorists seek to explain learning in terms of observable and measurable responses to environmental stimuli. This theoretical approach to cognition grew out of condition-reflex experiments of Pavlov and the work of the American psychologist Thorndike. Pavlov’s studies of conditioning led to an understanding that behavioral responses could be predicted and controlled through conditioning, where stimulus leads to a set
response (Pavlov, 1927/2003). Thorndike built on this, proposing that at least in part, psychology was independent of introspection. This approach assumes motivation and action is at least in part a learned, conditioned response, and learning is a result of habits formed through trial and error (Thorndike, 1911): rewarded responses tend to be reinforced and punished responses eliminated.

Skinner developed his ideas of radical behaviorism based in the work of these predecessors. Skinner (1953) asserted that all learned behaviors were functions of reinforcements, and the basic tenet of his operant conditioning theory is that when a response is followed by reinforcement (positive or negative) the response is strengthened or redirected, depending on the reinforcement. Behaviors that are operantly conditioned have been reinforced. The theory relies on rewards and punishments to train a person to display requisite behavior. Radical behaviorism does not attend to mental processes. Through this view, "if the proper attention is paid to the variables controlling behavior and an appropriate behavioral unit is chosen, orderliness appears directly in the behavior and the postulated theoretical processes become superfluous" (Zuriff, 1985, p. 88). Radical behaviorism does not claim that there are no inner processes of the mind, but that they are not relevant to the prediction, control, and analysis of behavior (Skinner, 1953, 1987).

While behaviorism approaches learning as a retraining of individuals and constructivism approaches learning from a standpoint of connecting mental schemata, in fact, in education, the two are not mutually exclusive. Cognitive functions occur through both internal mental connections and external stimuli. The following section explores this in more depth.
Motivation

To be motivated, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), is to be moved to do something; it is the action towards an end result that characterizes one as motivated. When they are motivated, students become active participants in their acquisition of knowledge. However, the factors that motivate are as varied as the personalities within a classroom. Motivation is constructed from individual experiences and activities, and it varies with situation. The individuals, context, and multiple dimensions of a learning situation impact on the motivation students will have towards that learning activity. In this section, four factors (types of learning goals, locus of control, self-efficacy, and resiliency) that influence motivation and impact each other will be described first, and then various theories about motivation will be explored. In the next section, the influencing factors will be revisited in terms of traditional and alternative learning settings.

Goals and motivation have a reciprocal relationship. Goals are the achievements sought by actors. They guide a person to behave in ways to accomplish the anticipated achievement: thus they motivate. Goals can originate from the teacher, the learner, or through collaboration. Motivation is an integral aspect of goal setting; whether one is attempting to avoid a negative reaction, attain a positive reaction, maintain the status quo, or fulfill a need, she/he is motivated by the desired goal. If learners lack goals, do not see a connection between actions and goals, do not feel they can achieve the goals set for or by them, or do not accept goals that are set for them, then the result is a lack of direction towards goal attainment and a lack of motivation to achieve. Maehr (1984) outlines four types of goals: ego, social
solidarity, extrinsic rewards, and task. With ego-goals, there is outward social competition: the goal is to do something better than another (Maehr & Sjogren, 1971). Social solidarity goals can be a strong motivational factor in the classroom, working in favor of or against the classroom structure depending on whether or not the actor buys into the structure and thus desires solidarity with it. Extrinsic reward goals are associated with earning some desired thing (money, grades, prizes, etc.). These goals are actually sub-sets of the end goals; completing a task is done to attain or avoid something other than the task: the task is secondary. Task goals (mastery goals) focus on the value inherent in the task, and the goal is the learning (task) (Maehr, 1984).

The perception of the locus of control surrounding events indicates one’s belief as to how much influence or power one has over events and their outcomes. Individuals with an internal locus of control feel their own behavior determines the events and outcomes; they control their own destiny. An external locus of control implies that fate, luck, people in power, or other external circumstances are in command of events and outcomes (Simons, Irwin, & Drinnin, 1987). Research suggests that an internal locus of control is inspired by a sense of self as agent; the belief that one can, “consciously or unconsciously direct, select, and regulate the use of all knowledge structures and intellectual processes in support of personal goals, intentions, and choices” (McCombs, 1991, p. 6).

Self-efficacy refers to sense of worth and ability. It is concerned with the perceptions students have of themselves as being able to accomplish the task at hand. With a high sense of self-efficacy students feel competent and believe that they can
accomplish what is set before them; they are capable agents of action that can meet their goal. Theoretically, these students show more interest in work, put forth more effort to accomplish their goals, and are more willing to persevere through challenges they may face (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

The ability one has to be flexible and persistent towards goal achievement is defined as one’s level of resiliency. One’s perception about her/his standing in social group (school, family, community) directly influences one’s persistence towards goal attainment. Resiliency indicates that if an individual feels her/his group cares deeply about, has high expectations of, offers purposeful support to, and values the participation in the group of her/him, then the individual will sustain faith in the future and will persevere to overcome most adversity (Krovetz, 1999; Tapper, 2002).

Behaviorists believe that through proper training (or retraining) students will grow into productive members of society. In regards to education and motivation, a behaviorist approach intends to lead a learner to the desired behavior: the individual is therefore externally motivated. The goals of behaviorist learning are generally extrinsically rewarded performance or ego-oriented. Learners are conditioned to act in certain ways (work on tasks, complete homework, etc.) through systems of rewards and punishments. A risk, then, is that the learner may value the resulting reward or punishment, not the learning in itself. If we look to self-motivated educational growth (lifelong learning) as a desired result of education, then a system that is perpetuated by this type conditioning is not optimal. While the locus of control for the rewards or punishments stem from the learner (if they behave in certain ways they can direct the results), the actual locus of control rests in the person (teacher) who is
doling out the rewards. This approach is based in an extrinsic motivational model: while the learner/actor can choose to behave one way or another (locus of control), the result (rewards or punishments) emits from outside the actor.

From a behaviorist perspective, education is changing behavior into desirable directions using external stimuli. Learners are directed with incentives and rewards: positive and negative reinforcements. Behaviorism, because it is so rooted in operant conditioning, does not consider the varied characteristics that influence motivation. It can be considered very impersonal, which can lead to a disconnection between learner and teacher, and learner and learning, effecting resiliency levels. Furthermore, as students become more advanced in and aware of their own psychosocial development and surroundings, many factors influence their decision making process. When this occurs, rewards and punishments used for conditioning must become more robust or severe. Students with developing concepts of justice, social acceptance, and peer awareness may not be as easily influenced by the rewards and punishments they initially accepted as reasons to function in the classroom; they may in fact wrestle with the idea of doing something for the anticipated reward because there is a greater reward in not doing the thing they were conditioned for.

As the levels of rewards and punishments increase, students' sense of resiliency and locus of control can be adversely affected. If students do not align with the conditioning expected of them, they will be punished, and in being excessively punished, they may feel that the community no longer values them, thus affecting resiliency and sense of locus of control. Behaviorism assumes that the learner will always understand the stimulus, response, stimulus relationship.
The educational concept of behavior modification has emerged in part from behaviorist theory. Such programs intend to shape behavior through conditioning (systems of rewards and punishments) and modeling. Behavior modification programs designed with a behaviorist approach give the stimuli (reward or punishment) directly to the learner, and through their receipt, the learner is conditioned to adjust their behavior. Social learning theory (SLT) is also based in the premise that learning occurs through reflection upon what we experience, but also through what we observe (Bandura, 1986). In SLT, learners observe and interact with people (teachers, staff, mentors) who model particular behavior. If the observers (learners) feel that the model possesses characteristics that they value, they are motivated to learn from and practice what was modeled. From these observations, learners construct their understanding of the environment. Because they choose whether or not they will follow the model, they are setting their own goals.

The process is similar to the extrinsic reward goal system of operant conditioning. However, Albert Bandura’s book, Social Learning Theory (1977), indicates a flaw in behaviorist theory: it is unidirectional and therefore fails to consider outside influences on behavior. Behaviorist theory can be explained as \( B = f(P,E) \), where behavior \( B \) is a function \( f \) of the person interacting within an environment \( P,E \) (Bandura, 1977, p. 9). The paradigm of SLT takes B, P, and E and indicates that the relationship between the three is intertwined and thus they impact on each other. This interactive relationship is called reciprocal determinism. In this model, there are times when external stimuli may initiate desired responses and other times when the learner's personal factors will have more of a determining impact on
behavior. This theory takes into account the learner’s own perceptions and the impact of those perceptions on the ability to learn. One’s cognitive and physical abilities, personality, beliefs, attitudes, and so on impact on both behavior and environment, and these in turn influence actions. In SLT the learner’s sense of self-efficacy impacts on what, how, and how much she/he will learn, and these are greatly influenced by her/his perceptions about what the surrounding community thinks of her/him (Bandura, 1997). Behavior can impact on the way one feels about oneself (self-efficacy) and one’s sense of value to one’s community (resiliency). Environment and behavior are also reciprocal phenomena: what a person observes can powerfully influence what she/he does and one’s behavior contributes to her/his environment.

Bandura (1986) postulates that there are three interrelating components that impact on motivation. According to this theory, self-efficacy (self-perceptions of competence), goals of learning (mastery versus performance), and judgment of usefulness of task being performed all impact on a learner’s motivation to accomplish an assignment, project, or learning objective.

One possible way for educators to help build student self-efficacy and thus motivation is to apply Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences. Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences (1993) suggests that people have different ways of perceiving and interpreting the world. He articulates eight intelligence styles which he labels the multiple intelligences (verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, body-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, inter-personal and intra-personal, and naturalistic). The core processing of learners is dictated by their intelligence style.
By recognizing and validating the intelligence style of students, educators may assist learners by teaching within their zone of proximal development and within the constructs of knowledge that already exist for them. By using a multiple intelligence framework in teaching, students are presented with varying forms of instruction. This validates different modalities at the onset of learning, and can support the perceived competence of students with varied intelligences. With this approach, students can be encouraged to use their preferred intelligence to pursue their studies. In doing so, students may more likely feel capable when attempting to learn new concepts. Ideally, once the initial schema is established (new information understood in the context of what is already known, or the zone of proximal development) students can then be encouraged to exhibit their learning, and continue it, through other forms as well. The self-efficacy of the students is preserved because the new information was learned via their strongest learning style. Because the style is recognized by the academic institution (class group, teacher, school) the learner feels valued and connected, increasing a sense of resiliency and self-efficacy.

The second component of Bandura’s (1986) system analyzes the goals of learning. This relates to the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that determine the learner’s purpose for learning: the goals. According to Bandura (1986), performance goals are not optimal for motivating learners. When students are concerned with meeting the expectations of their assessor, or with displaying their competence for another person to assess and evaluate, as is in the case with performance goals, motivation is dependent on extrinsic values: purpose and assessment is coming from outside of the self. Errors and inaccuracies are viewed as
mistakes, and provide evidence, in the orientation of performance goals, of a student’s inability to acquire the new knowledge: they are faults in the acquisition of knowledge. In contrast, mastery goals indicate interest in development of skill in an area of learning. Mastery goals are created with the input of the learner and have the focus of the acquisition of new knowledge that the learner perceives as valuable. Learners are a part of the creation of the mastery goals, along with the facilitator/teacher, and in as much, the learners help develop the goals of learning. Learners pursue mastery work towards acquiring knowledge and see their efforts as a positive and effective way to achieve a goal because they have selected what and how they will be learning. In mastery learning, errors are viewed as a natural part of the process of learning, a step in the acquisition of knowledge and the progression towards mastery. This perspective of errors and effort can occur because students are motivated intrinsically to move towards goals; they are attempting to acquire and master the content, not prove what they know (Dweck, 1990).

Figure 1 indicates the differences between motivation and initiation as represented in performance and mastery goals. The third component of Bandura’s (1986) system relates to the learner’s perception of the usefulness of learning. When students perceive their efforts towards learning as a means to a productive end, they are more likely to pursue the knowledge, whereas if there is no apparent connection to the real world or productive end, students are less likely to commit to the process. By employing a mastery goals approach to education, students are encouraged to help
create learning goals and therefore can structure goals that are valuable and useful to them.

Bandura’s system ties in with Glasser’s control theory. Glasser (1986, 1990) theorizes that behavior does not come from outside stimuli; rather it stems from what people desire. If students feel that learning goals are meeting their needs they will more likely dedicate effort towards reaching those goals. When students view their schoolwork to be irrelevant to their needs, they may become unmotivated.

In order to enhance motivation, Glasser (1986) indicates that teachers must work to develop curriculum and assessments with their students. By including the student in the construction of the curriculum, a student’s self-perceived needs can be met while the student also develops a better understanding of the teacher’s goals. In this way, standards and goals of the teacher, school, and state can be met while using the desires and needs of the student to shape how and what they are taught. Figure 2 presents a summary of factors that influence motivation, from Glasser’s perspective.
Taking the learner’s emotional state and perceptions of self into consideration, and incorporating the learner in the development of the curriculum goals so that the learner sees them as useful are considered progressive approaches to education. The focus in this approach is how to best assist the student to learn. A different approach, the fundamental or traditional approach, is concerned with giving the student the necessary basics that they need in order to function within society. Along with the concerns of how to best teach, progressives and traditionalists also differ in what to teach, and what the purposes behind teaching are (Weissglass, 1999).

**Historical Tradition and Progressive Approaches in Education**

In order to explain the need for alternatives in education we must first understand the traditional approach. This section will first examine how and why education tradition may have been established. Then, it will explore traditionalist education in terms of what we know about motivation and cognition, in order to differentiate between traditionalist and progressive approaches to schooling.
Early approaches to education viewed the learner as a vessel to be filled. This may be related to the roles young people played in their society: since they worked alongside of adults, as adults to help to sustain the life of the community. Their physical assistance was necessary to produce what was needed: food, shelter, safety. They were trained to do what was expected and needed of them: student as vessel perspective. The industrial revolution made it possible for fewer people to produce more goods, while doing less work. Changes in transportation made trade more cost effective. These changes in industry, finance, and ultimately the securing of survival paved the way for new perspectives of students and learning to come to light. Still, the mindset of filling the vessel dominated thinking for many generations. It was the tradition, the way it was always done.

The back to basics movement of the 1970’s provides a clear illustration of what traditional education is, and why many people support it. In the 1960’s (a time noted for political and social upheaval) the traditional, tightly structured approach to education was traded in for open classrooms and student empowerment (Dickson, 1991). In addition, the American government’s focus on education began to include programs like bilingual education. These changes marked a move towards a progressive approach to education. The social and political unrest and the policy changes of these times influenced the traditionalist perception of diminishing standards of respectability and good manners, and increased discipline problems between young people and authority. These perceptions fueled the drive for a back to basics mentality in many communities (Dickson, 1991).
This return to traditional schooling meant a return to teaching the fundamentals: emphasizing reading, writing, and math (Chandler, 1999; Dickson, 1991; Weissglass, 1999). Palardy (1988) identifies concepts that help define traditional, including frequent assessment and minimal student decision making. Traditionalists also seek to establish standardized curriculum and testing, to closely track students, and to eliminate educational frills (Apple, 1988; Chandler, 1999; Weissglass, 1999). In a traditional perspective, the best way to teach the basics involves rote memorization and operant conditioning (Chandler, 1999; Weissglass, 1999). One claim often heard in favor of traditional education is that it worked in the past. Proponents of this ideology state that this was how school was taught in most of America's educational history and it is how we have come so far. There are at least two problems with this perspective.

The first problem that arises is that this claim assumes that what worked in days gone by should work today. In the past, a person could establish and maintain a living (fill out a job application, work, find housing, and so on) with minimal education and academic skills. There were many jobs that did not require strong academic pedigrees. Students who did not fit the academic mold could still be employed. Today, it is increasingly difficult to find a career that does not require at least a high school diploma. Many careers require a two- or four-year college degree. People who do not have at least a high school diploma struggle to secure employment and financial independence. Furthermore, due to political, social, and economic changes, a vast majority of students attending schools and universities today would not have had such opportunities in the past. Incorporating these students, with their
diverse forms of social and cultural capital, modes of communication, and perspectives has impacted on the perception of what works in a classroom. It is a different world.

A second issue goes even deeper. It is the very assumption that what worked in the past actually worked best. We have learned much about ourselves and the world in the last century. For instance, advancements in the field of medicine have shown us that many things we once deemed as healthy were actually detrimental to our well-being. When we rely only on what once was as our only guide, we fail to consider what we have learned, and in the fields of cognition and motivation we have learned much. To behave strictly in the ways of the past because of tradition denies all the new knowledge we have acquired.

In terms of cognition, the traditional approach ignores much of what has been learned in the last century. As stated above, traditionalist education relies on operant conditioning and rote memorization. Both of these approaches establish learning patterns (schemata and goals) that are removed from the learner. These approaches are not ways to teach, they are ways to train.

As stated earlier, we have a greater understanding of the different social and cultural capital that students bring to school (Bourdieu, 1986; Heath, 1983, 1989). The schemata that students come to school with are the building blocks of what they know about the world and how to communicate in it. This existing base is the starting point of their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986). This zone is not fixed by age or grade and therefore assuming that all students can, or should, perform academic tasks at a set point is an unsound pedagogical assumption. This is
not to say that many students do not fit within a range; in fact they do. However, to view teaching as the transmission of the basics assumes that all students have the same basic education, which can cause problems for students and teachers alike.

Traditionalist approaches also ignore much of what has been learned about motivation. Traditionalist education relies on extrinsic rewards and punishments, and therefore the goals are external to the learner (Chandler, 1999). Learners are not included in the development of curriculum or assessment, and so the purpose of learning is often removed from their framework of understanding, which often obstructs motivation (as any teacher can attest to who has heard the question: "Why do we have to learn this?"). As traditionalist approaches do not include the student in the decision-making (Chandler, 1999; Dickson, 1991), they place the locus of control outside of learners, and may cause the purpose of learning to be unclear for learners.

As described above, a key factor in motivation is having an understanding of why one must do what one must do. The usefulness of the objective needs to be clear. In traditional approaches, where learners are conditioned act through rewards or punishments, motivation to act may disappear without the responding stimulus.

We know that people do not all learn the same way (Gardner, 1993; Heath 1983). We also know that people learn better when they understand and believe in the purpose behind their learning (Bandura, 1986; Dweck, 1990; Glasser, 1986). Traditional educational approaches often disregard this by implementing teacher-selected goals and teacher-directed education (Reimer & Cash, 2003). They typically rely on a factory-style model, with deviation for student interests and curiosity only when it can be fit in the parameters of the externally set guides (via federal, state,
local, school, and teacher planning). This is not to say that traditional education does not work. It does for many students; but for the students who are not succeeding in these environments, there is a need, greater than ever, for alternatives.

Table One (adapted from Chandler, 1999) illustrates some of the essential differences between traditional and progressive educational approaches. Progressive education evolved over the last century as a result of the emerging awareness in the fields of cognition and motivation, as articulated above in the respective sections.

In terms of cognition, traditional approaches assume that knowledge can be conveyed between the knower and the learner. In this structure, the learner acquires knowledge by listening, reading, and interacting with one who knows. Traditional approaches generally have set curriculum, designed by those who are already deemed educated, in order to convey a somewhat set body of information. Progressive approaches generally assume knowledge is individually constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, based on experience, learning style, need, and drive. Progressive designs often include the learner in the process of curriculum making, from goal setting to evaluation of progress. In general, progressive educators believe that this enhances the quality of what is learned and assists in the motivation of the learner.

During the last century, many educational programs have been influenced by the progressive model. The result, if one were to broadly examine America's schools, is an amalgamation of traditional and progressive approaches. Mainstream, public schools are not all based in traditional approaches, nor are all alternative schools progressive. Alternative schools are designed to offer something different from the mainstream of the community they are established in.
Table 1 *Comparison of Traditional and Progressive School Approaches to Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Traditional schools model</th>
<th>Progressive schools model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Designed for all children to reach same level of minimal competency.</td>
<td>Designed to recognize differences among learners as individuals.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Focuses on basic academics: reading, writing and arithmetic.</th>
<th>Incorporates a range of issues, including both academic and social concerns.</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>Direct instruction by teacher, homogenous grouping.</th>
<th>Self-directed learning, discovery learning, cooperative and collaborative heterogeneous grouping.</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Reliance on periodic testing with standardized tests.</th>
<th>Relies on portfolios, individual and collaborative projects.</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Assigned by comparing performance with each grade peers; static and final.</th>
<th>Often used, but more emphasis on teacher comments on progress; seen as progress checks, and are subject to change with growth.</th>
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</thead>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Philosophical Underpinnings</th>
<th>Schools are supposed to prepare students to fill a role in society. Workers, not transformers.</th>
<th>School should help students become thinking citizens who can contribute to creating a more just society.</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Emphasizes academic skills as demonstrated in the traditional core areas.</th>
<th>Emphasizes the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of human development.</th>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Role</th>
<th>Vessel, in need of training/programming.</th>
<th>Constructor of knowledge, a part of the process.</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher role</th>
<th>Academic instructor, source of knowledge, authority figure.</th>
<th>Facilitator, counselor, mentor.</th>
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Alternative Education

Defining alternative education is complex. It is an umbrella term used to identify programs with the common trait of being designed to provide a different kind of school experience from what is available prior to their creation. However, the structure, philosophy, populations served, and delivery models of these programs vary widely. Such programs exist in individual classrooms, as schools within schools, as separate school buildings within districts, as multi-district initiatives, and as entirely separate entities (Chalker, 1996; Hefner-Packer, 1991; Raywid, 1994).

Alternative learning programs attempt to meet the needs of distinctive populations, although there is a broad range of populations that are served in such programs (Chalker, 1996; Raywid, 1994; Reiner & Cash, 2003). While there are programs designed to meet very specific needs, many of the alternative programs that exist serve a variety of population (Reimer & Cash, 2003). Some programs are created because parents and community members feel that certain philosophies need to be more articulated in educational programs. Examples of such alternative programs include fundamental, back to basics, religious and parochial, and free schools. Many of these schools are established as charter schools (Hansel, 2001). These schools are often established because the founders have a different vision than the public, mainstream schools of the community in which they are created (Berman, Nelson, Perry, Silverman, Solomon, & Kamprath, 1999; Hansel, 2001).

There are alternative programs designed to attract students with particular gifts, talents, and areas of expertise (Reimer & Cash, 2003). Magnet schools often fall under this category. These programs are for learners who have a particular talent
or area of expertise that they hope to hone, or for those who have particular strengths in their learning styles. Some have been created for students who choose to begin working in their chosen field. There are programs designed to focus on particular aspects of development, including (but not limited to) college preparation, vocational education, motivation building, and confidence development.

Other alternative programs often implement a variety of elements to reconnect disheartened, at-risk, and dropout students with learning (Reimer & Cash, 2003). Some are designed for students who are incarcerated for criminal, destructive, or excessively distractive behavior beyond what a mainstream school or classroom can provide for. There are also alternative programs designed for students who are emotionally or psychologically in crisis or otherwise unable to function as a part of mainstream classes.

In introducing the theoretical rationale, this paper referred to the revision of the New York State Standards for education. The goal of these revisions is to prepare students to be productive in society by incorporating the students’ cognitive-intellectual development with their social, inter-, and intra- personal development. Learning theorists, psychologists, anthropologists, and educators have suggested that while many characteristics of human development may be similar, the effect of varying characteristics in an individual life make learning, development, and growth somewhat unique for each individual (Bourdieu, 1986; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003; Gardner, 1993; Lee, 2002; Noble, 1999). This creates many learning styles, codes through which people conduct themselves, and expectations of the outcomes of education. Despite the varying types of social and cultural capital, learning styles,
communicative modes, and existing schemata students bring with them to school, traditional classrooms assume students are at relatively the same place and provide curriculum and methodologies that are used to teach from that place (Bourdieu, 1974, 1977; Gee, 2000; Heath, 1983). If this is true, and if the system is designed to allow all students the opportunity to learn and attain the quality of life that they desire through their educational efforts and accomplishments, then providing alternative settings is not an option, but an essential part of school communities (Dynarski, 1999; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Mainstream schools recognize mainstream ability and culture, but not every student exists in the mainstream. Alternative education programs are designed to meet the needs of these other students.

One type of alternative approach can be seen in a Progressive Alternative Education Program (PAEP) (Chalker, 1996; De La Rosa, 1998; Neumann, 1994; Raywid, 1994; Remier & Cash, 2003). In PAEPs, students are encouraged to pursue knowledge in ways that best fit their learning styles. This approach stems in part from Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, H., 1993). These programs frequently assert that when students are encouraged to grow through the styles that best suit them, they are able to more fully explore and appreciate the subject matter. Once they are comfortable in the newly acquired content knowledge, the teacher can then help bridge them to further learn and perform through other learning styles. Traditional educational models rely heavily on textual references and the intelligences of verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical. While these intelligences are also utilized in a PAEP, the other intelligences are equally available to students who so choose to pursue their growth in those ways. The focus in a PAEP is to meet the
students at the place they are, in the ways that they can best learn, in order to facilitate educational growth. This corresponds with the above mentioned theory of intrinsic motivation: when students are allowed to pursue new content knowledge in their preferred learning style, they more readily feel a sense of self-efficacy when learning. Once they have learned the content, their learning can then be scaffolded to expressing and developing their new knowledge through the modalities that they are still developing their skills in (for example, a kinesthetic learner may learn about rhythm and rhyme first through dance and music, but once rhythm and rhyme are mastered through the learner’s preferred intelligence, the teacher can scaffold to other intelligences, such as verbal-linguistic, through the use or teaching of poetry.)

In his social development theory, Vygotsky (1978) states, “All higher functions originate as actual relationships” (p. 57), and so our minds and the things that they create grow from the social environments we exist in. Through this lens, PAEPs seek to build the students’ relationships toward being productive members of their communities. Recent studies suggest that the level and type of community orientation of school members significantly impact the outcomes the community produces (Royal & Rossi, 1996; Vergun, Dornbusch, & Steinberg, 1996). J.W. Gardner (1991) created a framework which included 10 elements that helped to define and explain what communities consist of: shared vision, shared purpose, shared values, trust, caring, teamwork, communication, participation, incorporation of diversity, and respect and recognition. These factors, to greater or lesser degrees, often inform the creation of PAEPs.
In PAEPs, students commonly help to build the goals and direction of learning (influencing goal orientation towards mastery and developing internal locus of control and self-determination) and are partners with each other and their teachers (Reiner & Cash, 2003). This sense of community is integral in most PAEPs, and the connection builds resiliency for learners (Krovetz, 1999; Tapper, 2002).

According to Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development, adults working in this manner can help guide students through scaffolding of prior knowledge and experience to new knowledge and experience. The progressive idea of teachers as guides is further developed through Bandura’s social learning theory. According to Bandura (1977), learners more likely will learn well from their guides if the intended outcome or behavior reflects some functional value to the learner, and results in outcomes valued by the learner. This concept of Bandura’s is important in PAEP because these programs often seek to provide such real-world experiences by incorporating the outside world into the curriculum and the educational experience, through projects involving community service, service learning, and internships.

Further theoretical support for PAEP can be found in Lave and Wegner’s situated learning theory. An off-shot of constructivism, situated learning puts forth that learning is a function of the activity context and culture in which it occurs (Lave & Wegner, 1990). This differs from traditional approaches where knowledge is often abstract and out of context. In situated learning, students are actively participating in the process of learning. They are members in a community of practice, in which knowledge is derived from doing. Relating back to the foundations put forth by Dewey (1897), in such learning environments, teachers guide the learning through
work practices and social relationships. This approach particularly serves PAEPs in that the acquisition of knowledge and skills occurs through interactions between novices and experts in real world settings. The purpose behind the learning is intended to be apparent and the outcomes tangible and valued by the learner. This is a major impetus in PAEP (McLellan, 1995).

Rogers and Freiberg’s theory of experiential learning also informs many PAEP. In experiential learning, students are encouraged to participate in all aspects of the education process: they are encouraged to pursue their own areas of interest in ways that directly relate to practical social, personal, or research issues, and they are responsible, in part or whole, for the evaluation of their progress (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Experiential learning provides the learner with more than textual learning; the experience of doing is a crucial component. For example, in traditional learning, students would learn about life of early Native Americans by reading textbooks and trade books, listening to lectures, watching videos, and having discussions. In experiential learning students might do this, but they might also read texts from a variety of viewpoints, visit museums, interview and meet Native Americans, have a wilderness experiences to experience early Native American lifestyles, and so on. Part of the experiential learning process is to use many resources, building learning beyond school walls and connecting it to the learner’s existing knowledge.

PAEPs customarily seek to provide learners with educational experiences that go beyond the classroom, connecting the learning to real life. The goal is to help student grow as learners, individuals, and community members. Many PAEPs begin with where the students are, basing the program on individual learning style and
schemata, and building the programs from there. PAEP are designed to support a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, and utilize much of what has been learned in the last century about cognition and motivation. The focus of this research is to study students attending one such PAEP.

There has been recent research studying the purpose, development, implementation, and varying degree of success in relation to alternative learning environments, particularly in transitional programs for students at risk (Beasley, 1991; De La Rosa, 1998; Eyler & DeGiles, 1999; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003, Gardner, 1991; Neumann, 1994; Richardson & Griffen, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1996). These studies help educators gain information about effective components of such programs, yet there is a key aspect of these programs that is under-represented in the research. The perspective of the student is rarely the focus of such studies, and in as much, there is a gap in the research regarding how and what students in such programs are actually learning. By examining perspectives of the students in alternative programs, we may gain insight into this, as well as to aspects of cognition and motivational changes.

Potential Significance of the Study

While there have been studies on outcomes of PAEPs in regard to college enrollment and career pursuits, little has been done in the evolution of process, the midpoint between acceptance into an PAEP and the departure of the student from said programs. This is important to study because while knowing a PAEP success rate is important (via promotion, high school graduation, and college enrollment),
understanding the process that creates such results may help both PAEPs and mainstream educators alike in meeting the needs of all students.

Much of the research focuses on programs that are designed to help meet the needs of students who are at-risk, defined by disruptive behavior, limited resources, drug or alcohol use, and so on. The majority of programs designed for such cases are set up as forced alternatives, in which students must participate (due to truancy, delinquency, or other factors that forbid their remaining in the mainstream of education) in order to remain in school. There is little research on PAEPs designed for students who self-select entry to PAEPs designed not as punitive or removal programs, but as options for learning beyond mainstream classrooms. Such studies are needed for a variety of reasons. Alternative education programs are steadily increasing in popularity, and examining a PAEP (which are underrepresented in the research) will help to inform educators and the public more fully on best practices. Self-selection into PAEPs may indicate some level of intrinsic motivation on the part of the students. Exploring how and why these students' select to leave the mainstream to enroll in the PAEP may inform educators as to how to create learning environments and experiences that can support all students, including those that currently opt or are forced to leave the mainstream. Such studies may also inform on the internal processes of motivation, which plays a key role in education. Finally, as federal, state, and local funding accounts for much of the cost of PAEPs, it is important to examine what these programs do, and how effective they are for students who are enrolled.
This study will explore the evolution and development of students' schemata in relation to cognition and motivation in a progressive alternative learning program designed for college-bound seniors. It is hoped that this study will offer new insights and understandings as to what impacts student development during what is essentially considered the final year before adulthood, with a goal of influencing evolving secondary-school program offerings.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

As we, the world community, become more connected and interdependent, it is important to recognize the diversity among us. This very diversity that we embrace as an American virtue also creates the most pressing issue facing us as educators: how do we reach all of our students? Because of our growing global connection it is useful to access all of our resources. One way to accomplish this may be by providing enriched educational experiences for all of our young people. Providing high quality, positive educational experiences to our young people fosters a sense of engagement and wonder in the world around them, connecting them to their communities (local, national, global), and building in them a sense of efficacy and connection, a sense of worth. When education is examined through these lenses, we are behooved to supply such opportunities, and not doing so is a detriment to all of us (in our local and global communities). Therefore, the importance of educating all of our young, particularly those at-risk, is “greater than ever” (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

This chapter will explore the ways educators and policymakers have tried to adjust educational practice to fit the growing numbers, varying backgrounds, and different interests and styles of students served in K-12 education settings. The first section will deal with the history of alternative education. Once this foundation has
been established, there will be an exploration of the terms related to the topic (alternative education, at-risk). From here, the various types of alternative programs available, the populations they serve, and the best practices will be examined. The next section will specifically address what progressive alternative education programs (PAEPs) are. The chapter will close with an exploration of some specific PAEP.

American Alternative Education: A Brief History

In his speech delivered at the Commissioner’s first annual conference on nontraditional studies, E. B. Nyquist (1973) talked first about the character from Greek mythology, Procrustes. Procrustes would give weary travelers a place to lie down, but once they did, he would either stretch them or cut off their appendages, so they would fit precisely on his bed. Nyquist relates this colorful story to what modern education does to its charges: we try to force all students to learn in the same ways, at the same time, and to the same degree. Almost 30 years later, researcher G. Coles proclaimed the same in his presentation at Fordham’s Annual Literacy Seminar: one size does not fit all (Coles, 2001). Nyquist went on to say that educational practice is predicated on many myths, including: that knowledge flows from the teacher to the students exclusively, that education can be correctly measured in credits, that there is a rhythm and pattern to intellectual curiosity and social maturity common to all of us, that degrees and diplomas are the only and best way to evaluate talent and competence, and standardized test scores are the best way to assess worthiness of promotion. Again, 30 years later, researchers and theorists continue to support Nyquist’s position. What panned out to be a strong support for Nyquist’s position was only something he could make suppositions about in his time. The fact that
technology is moving at such incredible paces, and that social institutions rise and fall with similar swiftness, indicates that modern education may benefit by taking into consideration the entire community it serves (all students) as well as the changing and varying needs of the culture. Nyquist, Coles, and many others have recognized and called to the forefront of educational issues the clear and undeniable fact that there are many students who are not optimally served by “traditional” educational institutions and structures.

The origins of this understanding date back, in fact, to the beginning of American education. While Amos Brown Alcott (the father of Louisa May Alcott) established one of the first free-school models back in the 1800s (Galley, 2004), Dewey is often considered the founder of educational progressivism and the father of alternative education because of his emphasis on individualized and experiential education (Reimer & Cash, 2003, Young, 1990). He understood that all people do not have the same needs, learning styles, or abilities. In promoting an individualized approach to teaching and learning, Dewey encouraged educators to abandon the factory approach to education that was fashioned and fostered by the industrial revolution. He put forth that the educator’s role was to change the conditions until the chance for the action and reflection that create student learning occur (Dewey, 1963).

This student-centered, individualized, experiential educational approach became known as progressive education. It was different from the traditional approach which was assumed a set body of knowledge to be conveyed from teacher to student, and which afforded students little room for exploration and
experimentation beyond the set curriculum. In a sense, Dewey's approach made all learning alternative to the tradition. Progressive approaches thrived through the 1930's, but seemingly fell out of practice in the following two decades (Neumann, 1994). There was in this time, however, one major research study undertaken by progressive educators. This study was done over the course of eight years and documented how learner-based, thematic approaches to education were at least as effective, if not more effective, than traditional educational practices (teacher-directed, discipline-centered instruction) (Aikin, 1942).

During the 1950's and 1960's the nation was ripe for change, and schools were accused once again of being cold and impersonal "machines" (Raywid, 1981). President Johnson declared a war on poverty, and the civil rights movement was beginning to take hold of the American public (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The political and social upheaval of the time found its way into the educational system and progressive approaches were revisited. The focus in education shifted away from emphasizing excellence toward the more humanistic goal of educating equitably (Young, 1990). The onset of "modern" alternative education, wherein progressive alternative education programs (PAEPs) were created, arrived during the 1960's. These PAEP were designed to counter the ill effects of poverty and the social injustice of institutionalized prejudice. During this time, alternative schools often focused on giving poor and/or minority students the opportunities (including college preparation, science and technology training, access to quality trade and textbooks, and exposure to enrichment opportunities) that were once denied them (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Raywid, 1994, 1999c). During the early 1970's, alternative
education (practice and research) received a boost by the President’s Commission on School Finance, which called for an increase in options and opportunities through alternative education programs (Stewart, 1993).

The PAEPs of the 1960’s began in the private sector, and then made their way into the public realm. They were implemented in the cities and suburbs (rural alternatives did not really take hold for almost 20 years, possibly due to funding issues) (Raywid, 1999c). Urban schools focused primarily on helping populations to succeed that previously could not (minorities and the poor), while suburban schools focused on innovative new practices (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Raywid, 1994, 1999c; Young, 1990).

The two distinct types of PAEPs that came out of the 1960’s were free-schools and freedom schools. Freedom schools were designed because, “groups of people sought control of the oppressive educational process to which they and their children were being subjected” (Graubard, 1972, p. 353). These schools sought community control and quality education for the underprivileged (Lange & Sletten, 2002). They were often located in church basements and storefronts. Free-schools, on the other hand, were based on individual student achievement and fulfillment. The concept that fuelled this design was that mainstream public schools were perceived to inhibit and alienate many students. The free-school approach was structured to allow children to pursue their natural curiosity and interest by giving them the freedom to learn without restrictions (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994). Academic achievement was important, but secondary to individual fulfillment. Free-schools
will be discussed further in a subsequent section, as the “original” and most noted free-school is still in operation, as well as many others.

While PAEPs were created and thrived for a variety of purposes in the 1960’s, many of the private alternatives were relatively short-lived, due to organization, funding, and lack of support (Raywid, 1981; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Young, 1990). While they may not have lasted, this time of innovation and experimentation laid the foundation of what we know and have as educational alternatives today. In the public sector, alternatives had flexibility and support (political and economical). This combination aided their durability (Raywid, 1999c).

While the 1960’s and early 1970’s were seen as “idealistic havens” for alternative education (McGee, 2001) with the focus on experiential learning, the whole child, and breaking away from the establishment, during the mid to late 1970’s and 1980’s, alternative education was drafted into the larger political and social agendas of desegregation and standardization (Bauman, 1998; McGee, 2001; Raywid, 1981, 1999c; Young, 1990). Educational options drifted “from the more progressive and open orientation in the 1970’s to a more conservative and remedial one in the 1980’s” (Young, 1990, p. 20).

The term magnet school in many cases replaced alternative school, and the meaning of these words indicates the shift in focus; instead of focusing on the student, the focus was on the school. Progressive alternatives are designed to meet students where they were and then help them along their path to fulfillment. Magnet schools are designed to bring in the politically “right” mix or kinds of students to a particular program, and are focused on the standard curriculum. Additionally, the
1970’s and 1980’s saw a rise in a particular type of alternative: the fundamental school. These programs were philosophically and programmatically diametric to progressivism: they were highly formalized, required deference to “authority” (teacher/adults), and relied on drill, recitation, and rote learning of formulaic curriculum (Neumann, 1994). They do, however, fit the definition of alternative: they are designed differently from mainstream education and they added to the diversification of choices in alternative programs.

Although modern alternative education was formulated during a time of progressive, student-centered thought, in the last 20 years the pendulum has swung towards a much more conservative approach (“The Social Construction,” 2005). The flexibility that allowed PAEPs to be designed to fit various needs, at least in part, aided the swing towards more conservative approaches. As crime rates rose, particularly with juvenile offenders, and as standardized test scores came to be seen as the benchmark of success, alternative programs were created and adjusted to try to fix all of the ills of society (Datnow, Hubbard, & Woody, 2001; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Kelly, 1993; Lange & Lehr, 1999; Raywid, 1999c; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). These programs were designed for disruptive, failing, and dropout students, those seen as “at-risk” and as a means to combat juvenile crime and delinquency, school vandalism, and desegregation (Lange & Lehr, 1999; Raywid, 1981, 1994, 1999b, 1999c; Wehlage et al., 1989; Young 1990).

McGee (2001) adds to this list the rise in personal and social problems that students have to deal with today, including divorced/unwed parents, teen pregnancy, lack of support for education at home, financial instability/low SES, high mobility, lack of
community ties, lack of engagement (academics and co-curricular, extra-curricular activities), academic failure, poor anger management, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, depression, suicide attempts, rise in community violence, gang affiliation, poor health with lack of access to health care, and drug and alcohol addiction. While some or all of these issues have always existed, addressing them and the obstacles they present if students' ability to learn have become a focal point of education. These issues were now seen to cause a rise in "bad" behavior and such "bad" students were seen to hinder the learning of the rest of the students. The goal was to remove and potentially "fix" the "bad" students, for the betterment of all. This caused a program shift in alternative education from progressive, student empowering curriculum, towards a "band-aid," often punitive or last-chance, approach.

Public alternative education has seen a reemergence in the last decade (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). In 2000, there were over 20,000 (estimated) alternative education programs in the United States (Barr & Parrett, 2001) serving approximately four million students (Lange & Lehr, 1999). In 1987, there were 15 states that had passed legislation to increase alternative education options for students (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998). By 1998, there were 39 states that responded to a survey regarding legislation on alternative education, with additional states citing that they have similar programs in their states, but because of the language of the educational legislation and the philosophy that the total academic programs were grounded in, they were not termed alternative (such as Texas) (Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998).
This wave of alternatives in education may have been precipitated by the commission assigned by President Regan to report on America's educational standing. *A Nation at Risk*, the ensuing report, indicated dire results of their investigation on the education and ability of America's youth, citing statistics relating to a seemingly universal decline of the academic and achievement levels of American students, including a rise in functional illiteracy, a lack of ability to compete globally, and deficiency in higher order thinking skills (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983). The ensuing fear was that the students, who were underachieving today, would be unable to achieve as adults and thus be unable to govern the country (Comer, 1987). The late 1980's and early 1990's saw a heightened awareness of numbers of students dropping out, and this further supported the alternative education movement (Fine, 1986; McCall, 2003; Ogbu, 1992; Parese, 1999).

In spite of the political pendulum swing, the ideas that shaped the alternative movement in the 1960's do influence the programs of today (Neumann, 1994). The two enduring characteristics of alternative education are that they are designed to respond to students who are not optimally served by traditional education programs, and that they depart (to varying degrees) from traditional programs and environments (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Raywid, 1994; Young, 1990). Much of what remains alternative in education has been designed for students at-risk. This term and its application to alternative education will be further described in the next section; however, it is important to recognize that the premise behind PAEPs is that many students are not optimally served by the mainstream. Therefore, all PAEPs, from Dewey forward, could be said to serve students at-risk in some way.
Defining Alternative Education and Students At-Risk

Upon examining the history of alternative education, and considering the meaning of life *alternative*, it becomes clear that a standard definition for alternative education is hard to establish. There is no succinct national portrait of alternative programs and the students that attend them (Aron, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002). To a large degree, the characteristics that define what alternative education is depend on the person submitting the definition. This section will first attempt to narrow the definition of alternative education, and then discuss what is meant by “at-risk” and the variety of other terms used to define the populations being served in alternative education programs and schools.

The U.S. Department of Education defines *alternative education* as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides non-traditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside of the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.55). The National Association of State Boards of Education (1994) indicates that the term *alternative education* may be applied to any program differing from traditional public school, but also states that it is usually connected to those designed for youth with challenging behaviors.

States offer a wide variety of definitions as well. The differences in definitions often relate to whether school enrollment is mandated or by student choice, what types of alternatives are included (juvenile justice, charter schools, magnet schools, private institutions, etc.), length of enrollment, and whether a
program (as opposed to a separate school) would constitute an alternative. New Jersey’s Department of Education defines alternative education as “an educational program that embraces subject matter and/or teaching methodology that is not generally offered to students of the same age or grade level in the traditional school settings, which offers a range of educational options, and includes the students as integral parts of the planning team” (New Jersey Department of Education, 1984). The state of Virginia has a similar definition: they are programs that aim to accommodate the needs of students not best served by the traditional schools, and vary in the level of departure from traditional organization, program, methods, and environment (Virginia Department of Education, 1994). Other states vary in the depth and breadth of their definitions. The term alternative education can be defined generally, and from state to state it may sound the same, but often it is operationalized in dramatically different ways. Even at the 23rd International Conference on Alternative Education there was conflict and confusion about what exactly fits into the category of alternative education (Neumann, 1994).

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center, “Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or a program. Alternative education is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur” (Morley, 1991, p.8). This often quoted definition reflects the first premise of PAEPs: they put students at the center of learning, focus on the whole learner, and embrace the potential for all things to be a part of the learning experience.
In spite of the widely varying definitions for alternative education, there are practices that are generally agreed upon. Alternative schools generally have smaller enrollment than their mainstream counterparts, there is a closer connection between students and staff, the environments are designed to support the specific population being served (although this does not always occur as planned), there is flexibility in the structure, and generally there is an emphasis on student decision making and choices (Arnow & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Gold & Mann, 1984; Morley, 1991; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Young, 1990).

The next section will deal in more detail with specific types of alternative programs and with what differentiates PAEPs. The important, though general, idea that serves all alternative programs is that they are theoretically designed to meet the needs of students who are not optimally served by mainstream (traditional) educational programs.

It is generally assumed that the students who populate alternative schools and programs are in some way different from other students. This is confusing for people who embrace the notions of diversity and uniqueness, and this confusion, in part, has added to the perspective that alternative school students are different in some negative way. The logic runs along the lines of “we’re all unique, but those students cannot function in the real/normal world,” thus relegating alternative students into the margins of society. The terms often associated with these students include: at-risk, disenfranchised, marginalized, vulnerable, disconnected, and disengaged.

At-risk can almost be used as a blanket term: virtually all people can be considered “at-risk” at one point or another (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Fields, 2001;
Raywid, 1994, 1999b, 1999c; Waxman, 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989). Slavin & (1989) gives a broad, all-encompassing definition including any student who may not graduate from high school. Causes of at-riskness (as described previously) are varied and the reality is that any person unable to take full advantage of educational opportunities, for any reason, is at risk (Fields, 2001; Waxman, 1992 Wehlage et al., 1989). In a report exploring schools as support communities for at-risk youth, the authors sum up the issue of the labeling game: “standard labels for student characteristics do not capture the nature of the interaction between at-risk students and the school” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 73).

Marginalized students are also known as disenfranchised or vulnerable students/youth. The pilot for this study provided extensive research into the area of marginalization. The first pattern that creates marginalization stems from low SES (Camitta, 1995; Kozol, 1991). If one considers Maslow’s Hierarchy, families that are struggling to meet the basic needs of shelter, food, and clothing are dealing with issues that impact on the level of support the families can provide for academic endeavors (Maslow, 1987). Kozol (1991) illustrates example upon example of the predicament that socioeconomic marginalization creates for students. In addition to having to find ways to compensate for their limited resources for basic needs, low SES students are competing with students who have ample means; as one student in the pilot mentioned, “How am I gonna compete with [named another student]? We live in a hotel room, he’s in a palace. I eat jelly sandwiches at dinner and take free lunch, and he eats at restaurants. I got to go to work after school; he gets to play sports and gets a tutor. And [ SP names a school administrator] tells me I need to
‘buckle down’ so I can compete. Please! Like moving the Hudson with a teaspoon” (author interview, 2/6/03). Such vastly different SES often creates situations where students intentionally disengage from the system because they feel (overtly or covertly) that they are destined to fail in that system anyway (Camitta, 1995; Dimitriadis, 2001; Kozol, 1991; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Moje, 2000).

The next pattern that influences marginalization relates to social and cultural capital, particularly in terms of literacy practices and language use. The patterns of our language use (our codes) are established by the social and cultural communities we are affiliated with; linguistically, we are what we live (Gee, 2000; Kucer, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). The seminal work of Heath (1983) showed educators and the larger world the impact of outside (home, community) experience on students and teachers in school. American education was designed by and for “middle-class” norms of speech, interaction, communication, belief systems, and expectations (Elias, 1995; Gould, 1996; Heath, 1983; Linn, 2001; Oakes, 1994) and those who are not being brought up with middle-class social and cultural capital are coming into classrooms that essentially devalue their ways with words, hence, marginalization.

The final cause of marginalization explored for the pilot was marginalization via prescriptive academics. The current trend in education is towards standardization measures that indicate all students should be able to achieve the same things, at the same times, in the same ways. Accountability for this is reached by batteries of testing that fail to take into account the multitude of variables, including SES, healthcare, parent/guardian educational level, resources available at home, school, and community levels, social and cultural capital, home and community language,
access to enrichment experiences, and student investment. While American media and lore holds that individuality is acclaimed, the education of America's youth is highly prescriptive; a "one size fits all" approach (Coles, 2001).

The terms disconnected and disengaged are also used to define students served in alternative education. While disconnected students may be at-risk, disenfranchised, marginalized, and vulnerable, they do not necessarily have to demonstrate any of those traits (Zweig, 2003). Disconnection relates to the student, who for any reason, simply is not connected to the mainstream. This may be because of the above mentioned reasons, but it may also stem from other reasons, including boredom, disinterest, different learning styles and abilities, and rebellion against authority. The point is that these students may not appear to have the dire circumstances that other at-risk students are experiencing, but ultimately their predicament is comparable: they are not well-served by traditional education. Like other at-risk students, they face social, economic, and personal stagnation, and thus may be well served by alternative education.

It is important to note, although it should be obvious, that students who are at-risk, disenfranchised, marginalized, vulnerable, disconnected, and/or disengaged are not incompetent. Many students who are labeled this way are intelligent and interested in learning, but they are not able and/or willing to thrive in traditional educational settings (Comer, 1987; DeBlois, 2000; Raywid, 1994, 1999b; Zweig, 2003).
General Typologies of Alternative Education Programs and Schools

As discussed previously, alternative schools serve many purposes and many different populations. Whether students feel disconnected, alienated, or disengaged from their educational program, or if they are at a point of crisis, they are considered at-risk, ultimately for dropping out of school (Fine, 1986, McCall, 2003, Ogbu, 1992; Parese, 1999). While there are many goals of alternative education programs, one of the most obvious is to reengage students so that they stay in school through completion. Students who do not finish high school (and who do not go on to college) are less likely to have the skills needed to survive and thrive economically (Pennington, 2003; Zweig, 2003). Based on this, it is generally understood that at least one goal of most, if not all, public alternative schools and programs is dropout prevention. Almost the entire body of research on public alternative education from the 1980's to the present day includes some reference to the issue of dropping out, regardless of the type or structure of the school. In fact, today, alternative education is more likely to be associated with at-risk or "bad" students than it is with a variety of models and innovation (Glines, 1992). Despite this association, the majority of alternative schools are created to provide a means of recognizing and building on student strengths and values, and as such, the schools seek to provide the best options for individual students (Chalker, 1996). Regardless of one’s political, education, and philosophical beliefs, alternative education makes sense: all students have the right to education so that they can grow and be fulfilled as individuals, and also so that they are able to contribute to society. Political, education, and philosophical beliefs do
come into play, however, in the reasons and ways alternative programs are designed and implemented.

There are literally thousands of alternative education programs, and the very premise of alternative education indicates that these programs will be different in many ways. However, Raywid (1994) created a classification system that is most commonly referred to in the literature. She defines three types of alternative education settings. Type I alternatives are considered schools of choice. This means that the students who attend the schools decide to enroll. Often there is an enrollment process and in secondary schools it may reflect the college admissions process (participating in interviews, filling out applications, writing an entrance essay) (Fields, 2001; Galley, 2004; Raywid, 1999b, 1999c). The understanding is that these schools are doing something different that students will find more rewarding than their traditional home schools experience. The perspective is generally in line with Dewey’s idea that the school should adjust to what and/or how the student will want to/ can learn (1963). A major focus of type I schools is to get the right match between students and program. The staffs at such schools are noted in the literature for their caring and dedication to the students and the programs. They almost universally volunteer and are generally selected from a pool of interested teachers (they choose to be at their particular alternative). The student centered approach, creating curriculum that revolves around student interests, highlights students’ abilities and develops their skills. Because the curriculum is focused in this way, Type I schools are generally longer term than types II and III. This approach is most in line with progressive educational theory and practice.
Type II schools are quite different in philosophy, form, and function from Type I. These schools are often called last-chance or second-chance schools (Raywid, 1994, 1999c). These are not schools of choice, students are no longer welcome at their home schools and are mandated to attend the alternative school/program before they are allowed to re-enter their home school. That they are considered “last” or “second” chance schools points to the fact that the students have behaved in some way that would cause the home school to feel they were a risk to other students. The titles also indicate that the students are at the “end of the line;” if they do not succeed at the last chance school then what? Many students attend these schools as the last chance before expulsion or even jail, and the design is usually short term: students are expected to return to their home schools once they reach the assigned benchmark in behavior (Reimer & Cash, 2003). The emphasis in these schools is behavior modification and discipline, and academics are generally remediation and rote learning (Aron, 2003; Lange & Lehr, 1999, Lange & Sletten, 1995, 2002; Raywid 1999b; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Zweig, 2003).

Type III schools, are designed with a remedial focus on academics and/or social and emotional issues. Like Type II schools, however, these schools are therapeutic in nature (Raywid, 1994, 1999c). These too are short term environments, but the focus is not on discipline, rather staff tries to help “heal” the students so that positive behavior and improved academics can be achieved (Lange & Lehr, 1999; Raywid 1994, 1999b, 1999c; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

These three types are not viewed by theorists and practitioners as static; there are many interchangeable elements and hybrids exist (Lange & Sletten, 1995;
Raywid, 1994). In addition to the three types of approaches attributed to alternative schools, they may also serve one of three purposes that Raywid (1999c) outlines as follows:

1. Change the student: These schools have a deficit student model. This approach is often seen in Type II schools, although it may be present in other types as well. Such schools may be openly punitive, highly structured, or therapeutic. Ideally, the idea is to modify behavior and remediate academics quickly and efficiently, so that the students may re-enter their home school. These types of schools often have low status to outsiders.

2. Change the school: These schools attempt to alter the school experience to fit the needs and abilities of the students attending. The curriculum is generally highly innovative with novel curriculum and instructional approaches, and there is often an unusually high positive school climate. There is generally an attempt to help students engage in their larger communities. These types of schools may originally have low status, but often the positive attitudes and academic engagement of students and staff, as well as the interaction with the larger community, lead to higher status.

3. Change the system: While Raywid (1999c) indicates this is relatively new, this literature notes that the early push for alternatives (free-schools, freedom schools) were examples of this. The current small schools movement is an attempt to change the system: to develop a sense of commitment through community (Meier, 1996; Raywid, 1999c; Sizer & Sizer, 2000; Wehlage et al., 1989).

The Research supports the idea that attempts at changing students are less
effective than those that attempt to change the schools or systems (Meier, 1996; Raywid 1999c; Sizer, 1997; Sizer & Sizer, 2000). Raywid (1999c) explains that punitive means rarely influence lasting change in student behavior, and therapeutic measures generally work while student are in programs, but upon reentry to home school, many of the students revert to old patterns of behavior. On the other hand, attempts to change schools have more lasting effects. Furthermore, focusing on the student as the problem disregards what research has found: namely that smaller schools, smaller classes, well trained teachers, school organization, and school leadership, all impact on students’ sense of community and commitment to that community. This in turn impacts on student success (Gregg, 1999; Kagen, 1990; Meacham, 1990; Newman, 1981, Wehlage et al., 1989).

The ideas that shaped the 1960’s have influenced the alternative education programs we have today (Neumann, 1994). While there are different philosophies and approaches, most researchers agree that the best functioning alternative programs should include the following criteria:

1. Small school and class size (Morley, 1991; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990),

2. One to one student/teacher interaction (De La Rosa, 1998, Morley, 1991; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990),

3. A supportive academic and social environment (Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990),

4. Opportunities for student experiences relevant to students’ future (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990),
5. Flexibility in structure (Cobb et al., 1997; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990).

Although the staff of individual programs ideally tailors the programs to fit their given populations, the following additional characteristics help to ensure that programs function optimally:

1. Clearly identified goals that inform evaluation enrollment (Gregg, 1999),
2. Full implementation, not piecemeal approach for structuring programs (Raywid, 1993),
3. Autonomy of program (Gregg, 1999),
4. Student-centered atmosphere (Frymier, 1987),
5. Integration of research and practice in areas of: assessment, curriculum, teacher ability, and special education services (Geurin & Denti, 1999),
6. Training and support for teachers working with at-risk students (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999),
7. Ties to a variety of agencies that help support student needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998).

If another important facet is the "fit" between academic program and individual (Arno\v{e} & Strout, 1980; Hendrick, MacMillan, & Balow, 1989). Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) suggest that the strongest predictor of school failure is the mismatch between student skills and interests and a school’s academic program. Barr and Parrett (2001) further support this idea, recommending students be placed in multi-grade environments that emphasize accelerated curriculum for mastery and attention to individual needs.
Students disengage (and dropout) of school in many cases because of poor academic performance. This may be caused by achievement, behavior, or disciplinary action (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). What often occurs from this is that students become wary of the school experience and do not trust the system. Wehlage and Rutter (1987) conclude that this may cause students to feel that, on a personal level, teachers do not care about them and on a system-wide level, that the system is not fair or effective.

Research suggests that poor student/teacher relations are another major cause of student disconnection and dropout; there is a lack of connection (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990, Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). They suggest that alternative schools can provide and strengthen connections between students and teachers, peers, school organizations, and communities. Other research indicates that high teacher expectation and support have a positive effect on behavior, academic investment, and social and academic success for at-risk youth (Duttweiler, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). This connectedness and membership encourages student attachment and commitment to the culture and goals of school. Alternative schools often emphasize an inviting climate and individual relationships between students and staff. This sense of caring may encourage students to persist in school and once they achieve a sense of academic success, their self-esteem may increase (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Epstein & McPartland, 1977; Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990; Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1996; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). As seen in the first chapter, increase in self-esteem can lead to increase in efficacy, both of which influence persistence and success. Wehlage et al. (1989) found that encouraging
student success also heightened teacher accountability for that success, which extends teachers’ role, their persistence with students, and their optimism about student potential. In their study of alternative programs, they found these elements developed a sense of school ownership. Enabling school structures, small class size, developing relationships while allowing the school autonomy (flexibility and control) created a “culture of care and support” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 147).

Research further shows that larger schools lead some students to feel alienated from the educational system (Newmann, 1981; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). An analysis of the High School and Beyond Study conducted in the 1980's showed larger schools had higher dropout rates (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). Smaller schools are linked to a reduction in violence, possibly because it allows for higher teacher engagement and thus lower discipline problems (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Smaller is a defining characteristic of many alternative schools. It promotes interaction among students and teachers, and creates a sense of community (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Wehlage et al., 1989). Students often report one of the reasons they willingly participate in alternative school programs is the sense of membership they feel in their community as a result of a warm and caring environment (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Specific Types of Alternative Programs and Schools

Many current alternative schools and programs are part of school districts’ (or consortium of districts) efforts to serve all students (Schargel & Smink, 2001). There are a variety of models of these programs that have been documented in the research. Hefner-Packer (1991) and Chalker (1996) outline the following models:
1. Alternative classrooms within traditional schools,
2. Schools within schools,
3. Separate alternative school with different academic program and (often) social behavior programs,
4. Continuation school for students who no longer attend traditional schools, who may have economic, family, childcare obligations, and/or personal problems that interfere with regular academic program, often called schools without walls, with flexible schedules and community locations (street academies, job-related training, parenting centers),
5. Magnet schools and charter schools.

Schargel and Smink (2001) add to this list:
1. Residential schools where students are often court ordered or placed by family (with special education programs and counseling),
2. Separate alternative learning centers, focusing on a special set of skills and having a separate location (public transportation is often important for students),
3. College-based alternatives: use college faculty but are designed to meet high school criteria and operated by public school staff. The college setting is supposed to help students' self-esteem and offer services to benefit growth,
4. Summer schools (remedial or academic enrichment to enhance student interests),
5. Second-chance schools “for students who are judged to be troubled” by courts/district (used as a last chance before incarceration or expulsion).

In addition to the variety of models, there are a number of instructional goals and delivery models that Chalker (1996) outlines:
1. School transition model: prepares students to return to district school environment, also used for disaffected youth between elementary to middle school and middle to high school,

2. Behavioral intervention: teaches survival skills needed for academic success,

3. Academic model: based on the idea that behavior problems are rooted in students’ academic frustration, focus on instructional methods (restructured schools, etc.),

4. Therapeutic model: helps students with problem-solving skills and appropriate behavior (wilderness camps often use this model),

5. Punitive model: uses punishment to deter behavior (proponents believe students deliberately cause trouble but does not look to why or to fix roots causes),

6. Vocational intervention: to make purpose of schooling clear and meaningful, often includes part-time employment and entrepreneurial school-based programs,

7. Dropout prevention,

8. School community partnerships: feature collaboration of community at large.

Based on the information presented in the body of available literature, it is clear why research on alternative education is often conducted as individual case studies. Given the variety of organizations, structures, philosophies, methodologies, curriculum, and instructional approaches, comparisons of different alternative programs and schools beyond general information (enrollment, attendance, standardized test scores, suspensions) is difficult and perhaps even fruitless.

Additionally, while there is a great deal of controversy about alternative education (its value, the need for it, the best types, the reasons to create programs), there is a dearth of research on specific programs available. The remainder of this chapter will focus
Progressive Alternative Education Programs (PAEPs)

Raywid (1994, 1999b, 1999c, 2001) makes the case that alternative education programs that fall in line with progressive practice are more effective than other forms of alternative education. She cites the reemergence in the last 15 years of the concept of engagement, and its importance in learning. She goes on to explain, as does Coles (2001), that for students who are not succeeding, more of the same is not what is needed. These students need a different type of school. Furthermore, she indicates that that the types of schools such students need cannot be predicted, because people thrive in different environments, and students will be interested in learning different things.

While there can be no formula, successful PAEPs do generally follow the "best practices" noted in the last section. Success is measured most often by students continuing and completing the course of study, by continuation on to college or vocational school/training, and by successful employment. Though much of the research is based in high schools, there are studies that have parallel results in middle schools and continuation schools (which students who have left school may attend to fill requirements for high school diploma or GED). Most Type I schools (Raywid, 1994) fall into the category of PAEPs, as do many Type III. The following list includes ways that PAEPs stand out from other types of alternatives, although it is important to note that this is not a checklist. PAEPs may exhibit these traits to
varying levels, and may not include all components in their makeup. Following is a list of the characteristics that help to delineate PAEPs from other alternative programs include:

1. Student choice to enter program (Barrett, 2003; Black, 1997; Cobb et al., 1997; Lange, 1998; Lange & Lehr, 1997; Raywid, 1993, 1994, 1999b, 1999c),

2. An environment focused on student needs, whole student approach to curriculum and instruction (Barr & Parrett, 1997; Baumann, 1998; Finn, 1989; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Morley, 1991; Remier & Cash, 2003; Weir, 1996),

3. Attention to issues of student self-esteem (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Griffin, 1993; Morley, 1991; Nichols & Steffy, 1997; Raywid, 1994; Smith, Gregory, & Pugh, 1981; Strathe & Hash, 1979),

4. Experiential, hands on learning, differentiation of instruction (individualized or small group instruction, self-paced independent studies, video and computer-guided instruction, and/or vocational components) (Cobb et al., 1997; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; McGee, 2001; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001; Remier & Cash, 2003),

5. Flexibility in schedule, curriculum, instruction, and interaction (Gold & Mann, 1984; Lange, 1998; Lange & Lehr, 1997; Lehr & Lange, 2000; Raywid, 1994, 1999b),

6. Academic options for students (Raywid, 1993, 1994, 1999b; Remier & Cash, 2003),

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A major component in effective PAEPs is that students have a sense of community (Barrett, 2003; Cobb et al., 1997; Epstein, 1992; Fields, 2001; Finn, 1989; Knutson, 1996; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1996). Connection to school may also lead to higher academic functioning: students feel physically and emotionally safe, and experience a sense of belonging (Fraser & Walberg, 1991; Goodenow & Grady, 1992; Wentzel, 1994). Students in PAEPs indicate they feel the staff is genuinely concerned about student academic, social, and psychological development (Beasley, 1991; Richardson & Griffin, 1994). Teachers who are supportive and seen as caring and concerned academically and personally tend to elicit higher academic striving from students (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Noddings, 1995a, 1995b, 2005). Some research has indicated that the sense of community results in more active student participation, a deeper sense of belonging, and greater academic and social success (Sergiovanni, 1996). Such programs may also include wilderness/adventure components, service learning/community service projects, and internships (De La Rosa, 1998, Reimer & Cash, 2003). It is pertinent to note that caring and compassionate staff does not necessarily mean a therapeutic or highly emotional environment. There are successful PAEPs that have highly dedicated staff committed to developing students with effective thinking skills. Staff can exhibit caring and compassion through fairness, academic support, and high academic expectations of students.
PAEPs are often rooted in an experiential learning approach. Many include service learning projects and/or internships, which provide students with a rich and varied knowledge of topics studied and ideas of how to effectively interact to accomplish goals. These experiences are combined with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection and self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2004).

Research shows a link between self-esteem, academic success, and self-efficacy. Academic achievement has a positive effect on self-esteem and academic self-efficacy (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990). PAEPs assume that when students have some control of their education, self-esteem and academic achievement levels rise (Epstein & McPartland, 1977; Reynolds, Simmons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1996; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Progressives have believed this for over a century. PAEPs focus on engaging the students by combining a caring atmosphere with a curriculum designed to pique the students’ interests and make learning connected to the reality of their lives.

Students satisfied with school are less likely to drop out (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), but there is little research that actually asks and documents how much students like school. Research that does explore this often poses liking school as a general question, not specific to a school or a program (Huebner, 1994). We know even less about what influences student satisfaction. The next section will explore specific PAEPs, highlighting research that includes student perspective. It is hoped that by examining how students see their experiences, and comparing these perspectives with
their accomplishments, a clearer picture of what PAEPs really do for students and how it gets done will be seen.

*Case studies in progressive alternative education programs.*

The following schools all fall into the category of PAEPs: they are outside of the mainstream (alternative) and they have at their central core a belief that students are intellectually curious. Furthermore, as PAEPs, they believe it is the responsibility of the school to provide the environment that will allow students to thrive.

The free-school movement is one of the early alternative approaches that have continued to survive, and even thrive in many cases, in spite of the movement towards standardization. A. Neill founded the first and most widely known democratic, free-school, Summerhill, in 1924 (Darling, 1992). A similar free school is the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts. There are more than 300 free schools in the United States and abroad, 31 of which specifically follow the Sudbury model (Galley, 2004). Following is a list of some characteristics of free schools:

1. No required learning,
2. No set discipline or controls and imposed on students; natural consequences are assumed to prevail; student and staff discuss issues and democratically create and vote on rules (these schools have extensive rules and regulations, they are generally designed and voted on democratically by all of the learning community),
3. Weekly, democratically run meetings (students and staff have equal voice and vote),
4. The only moral value taught is that everyone has an equal right to self-determined fulfillment,

5. Evaluation based not on assessing the progress towards goals but on the learning environment in its ability to facilitate the investigations the students’ desire and fine rewarding (Darling, 1992; Galley, 2004, Lange & Sletten, 2002; Mercogliano, 1998).

Free schools rarely have formalized teaching, although if enough students have an interest they want to pursue, staff can organize “sessions.” In these private schools, academic achievement is important but it is seen as secondary to individual happiness. Academic achievement is valuable only in that it helps achieve the goal of self-fulfillment.

The Fairhaven School in Washington follows the principles of democratic education and is organized after the Sudbury model. Mark McCaig, a full time staff member and one of the founders at Fairhaven says about learning, "We realized the more freedom and choice we gave people, the more they learned. Not necessarily academic stuff, but about being a human being” (Galley, 2004). In this Sudbury-modeled school, students must approach staff and ask to be taught. Students are required to spend at least 5 hours daily on campus, but they spend it the way they choose. Some attend classes that are formalized, others meet one on one with staff, and still others participate in independent or group studies. Furthermore, students may elect not to participate in any studies while on campus. The idea is that students will develop their natural curiosities, and when allowed to do so, they will acquire what they need in terms of education.
While these schools seem to have a high level of student contentment, and report high graduation and college enrollment rates, there is also information that indicates a totally "free" approach may not best serve all students. One student at Fairhaven had attended the school for 5 years. When he graduated and took his competency tests for college, he was in the 99th percentile for verbal, but only the 68th percentile in math. He attributed this to the fact that he had elected not to "do math" in five years (Galley, 2004). While the student sought and found help from a Fairhaven staff member, the fact remains that not all students will have interests that will facilitate learning what the next phase of their lives (college, employment) might expect of them. However, the goal of these schools is to help children to grow into life-long learners, and to provide them with an environment that facilitates this by developing their natural curiosity, self-esteem, and efficacy. As in many PAEPs, free-school graduation requires students to create a portfolio or thesis describing how they have become effective adult members of society. Free schools claim high graduation and college enrollment rates (Darling, 1992; Galley, 2004). In fact, Sudbury Schools claim up to 90% of their students go on to postsecondary education (Galley, 2004).

Madison Prep offered another example of progressive alternative education program, although unlike Fairhaven, it was designed for public school students (Dunn, 1981). The founder asked for the 20 "worst" students in her school, a separate location, and the freedom to reach and teach the students. The students were given an intense questionnaire regarding academic abilities, learning styles, interests, and personality. The staff then tailored individual learning programs for the students.
The students, who had previously demonstrated chronic absence, socially maladjusted and criminal behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, and academic non-achievement and under-achievement, found both academic and social success. This success could be measured by the creation of a student-run school newspaper, successful trips to city hall where they met with the mayor, positive interactions with interested visitors to the program including senators, assembly people, the chancellor of NYC schools, and various reporters, student self-identification with and ownership of the school (space designed, planned, organized, and created by the students, spending time there beyond classes), and graduation.

Students and staff attribute the school’s success to the small size, mutual caring, individual and group achievement, individualized instruction, and sense of community ownership (Dunn, 1981). These traits all identify the program as a successful PAEP.

Perhaps the most noted example of a successful progressive alternative education program is Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS). Deeming this school a success can be justified in any number of ways: its leadership has received various prestigious awards in innovative education; the school itself has been recognized in many ways, including Harvard University and the Ford Foundation’s Innovations in Government award and being recognized as one of the nation’s five New American High Schools (Raywid, 1999a). Additionally, although the school is situated in “a neighborhood where crime, drugs and violence abound” (Raywid, 1999a, p 132) it boasts a mere 5% dropout rate compared to the 71% average in New York City (Scherer, 1994). Furthermore, the CPESS graduates more than 90% of
their students (although some students take five years instead of traditional four) (Raywid, 1999c). Of those, 97% go onto college (Raywid, 1999c).

The CPESS focuses its approach on the “less is more” ideology embraced by the Coalition of Central Schools. What this entails is a shift from covering a broad range of material to studying a particular (small) set of information in great depth and from a variety of perspectives (Schwartz, 1996).

Other PAEPs may initially attempt to develop the emotional connection, and then work on academic growth. As mentioned earlier, Raywid (1999a) found that the CPESS staff demonstrates caring through their commitment to the students and their belief in student ability. This is not to say that caring and compassionate relationships do not exist at the CPESS, rather that they emerge from the commitment staff has to helping students develop.

Raywid (1999a) attempts to articulate what makes the CPESS so successful. She discusses the ownership students and staff have over the school. The faculty is self-directed and highly reflective: they are able to tailor their teaching to suit the needs of the students and their community on a regular basis. Another aspect of the success at the CPESS is that they clearly plan how to accomplish what they set out to accomplish. They keep it simple (teach students to use their minds well in the interest of preparing them to live productive, useful, and satisfying lives) and devise and redesign the curriculum accordingly. The original staff sat down together and decided what students needed to leave school with in order to accomplish this goal, and then, worked their way backwards in order to devise curriculum that would
provide these things. While the staff and students have changed over the years, this process continues (Raywid, 1999a).

The CPESS is committed to respecting the entire community (Bensman, 1987), and this includes listening to everyone's voice. No question, if reasonably posed, remains un responded to. The CPESS is strongly rooted in the ideas of progressive education; it is a learning community with the utmost reverence for young minds and their potential. Students respond to being taken seriously (being listened to, having their questions thought over and thoughtfully responded to), and eventually come to see themselves as intellectual. They also begin to take others as seriously as they are taken. Many students experience a new-found self-respect for their abilities and their potential (Raywid, 1999a).

Another contributing factor to the success of the CPESS is its size: teachers have half the student load of traditional, mainstream high school teachers (Raywid, 1999a). This is important because it enables the teachers to really get to know their students, and thus to tailor instructional styles and curriculum to the students interests and abilities. Raywid also puts forth that because the students and teachers have chosen to be at the school, they are committed to it, thus impacting on its success. They share a vision of what the school should accomplish, and a commitment to accomplishing those goals. The staff meets extensively and spends a great deal of time reflecting and revising their practice. While there is a great deal of autonomy, this does not mean that the teachers are isolated; at the CPESS it is just the opposite (Meier & Schwartz, 1995). There is constant discussion and collective decision making regarding curriculum and instruction at the school.
Ultimately, Raywid (1999a) attributes the CPESS’s success to the commitment of the self-selecting staff and their ability to design the curriculum, the school organizations steadfast connection and subordination to (and support of) its instruction, and the ability of the school to chart its own course. It is important to note that there recently have been questions regarding the success of this PAEP. While new examination may reveal gaps in the programs success, it is important to note that the program, theoretically, has the elements which research in progressive education indicates help build success.

The final study of a PAEP to be explored was conducted by Epstein (1992). The study was a follow up to a study of 20 high school dropouts who subsequently choose to enroll in a PAEP named The Oakland Street Academy. The study found students expressing common criticisms of home school experience including a sense of anonymity, an uncaring staff and environment, and an overwhelming humiliation experienced in school. Furthermore, the study showed that the 20 students in the study attending the PAEP completed the program, received high school diplomas, and either successfully completed four years of college or were attending and passing their first years of college (Epstein, 1989). The follow-up study (Epstein, 1992) explored the differences two students (selected as representative of the original study’s sample) noted between the schools they dropped out of and their alternative school experience. The second study also aimed to discover how mainstream schools and teachers can address these issues. The two students provide a rich and moving description of how difficult and dehumanizing mainstream education can be to students who do not “fit in.”
Both students discussed their lack of connection to curriculum and staff at their home school (Epstein, 1992). One student stated, “I was invisible, man” (p. 55), and he went on to explain how he never got the chance to meet with his guidance counselor, until he was about to fail out. This student also said he would miss classes (skip) and because the school did not inform anyone at his home, he continued with sporadic attendance. The other student voiced similar issues, including hiding a failing report card, and never being discovered because the school and teachers never called home. Contrary to the home school, the PAEP the students attended kept in close contact with home, although the relationship was one designed to best support the student, not penalize them. The aim is to address issues before they become problems. Furthermore, Oakland has consulting teachers for each student, which the student selects for her/himself. The role of this teacher is to know and help with every aspect of the student’s life. Both students reflected on how this relationship makes all of the staff, particularly the consulting teacher, seem more approachable and causes the students to feel more connected to the staff and the program.

Another issue reported in the research study related to the curriculum. One student indicated the home school did not teach anything that mattered to her (i.e.: multicultural education) and that much of what was considered schooling was really finding the answers in the book. She further stated that since the books were used, the answers were often underlined, or otherwise, there was an answer key in the back of the text. As she progressed in Oakland, she found in herself a love of reading that was boosted by the completion of reading her first book, wherein she wanted to say,
"Give me a Grammy, please!" (Epstein, 1992, p. 59). The other student explained his learning experience at Oakland as follows:

Man, you would just sit there and cry. You would just burst out in tears and say, 'It took me this long to get this. This is so easy and I'm just getting it.' But wow, I wanted to keep on. People were there telling me I was smart, when people all my life had been telling me I was dumb. And I'd say, 'Well maybe if they think I'm smart, I'll just be smart.' It gets in there; you sort of confuse yourself psychologically. (Epstein, 1992 p. 62)

These examples are indications of the commitment students in the program found in themselves towards their own learning. Oakland fostered this in a variety of ways.

The common findings of what made Oakland a success included a building that felt "like an elementary school" (Epstein, 1992, p. 63). All of the staff members were actively involved with the students' personal, emotional, psychological, and academic well being and development. The students indicated that mainstream experiences left them feeling anonymous and irrelevant, but at Oakland, they were individuals, and a valued part of the community. The curriculum was always presented in the context of the students’ lives. They read books and newspapers and had discussions about the things that interested the staff and the students. Staff fostered community and helped students learn the value of perspective by actively involving each student. The researcher found that, contrary to the opinion of the teachers and administrators at the original, traditional school, Oakland's students did want to learn, but often declined to be involved because of the humiliation they experienced or feared. In regards to their home school experience, one student indicated she had an overwhelming fear of being seen as dumb, while the other said teachers openly ridiculed and teased him. Contrarily, Oakland staff worked to make the students feel comfortable and safe enough to share their thoughts without the
humiliation of being put down or told they were wrong. This was done in large part by asking for further clarification, which also developed the students’ skills of logic and reasoning and their ability to clearly articulate their ideas.

These examples of PAEPs were selected to demonstrate the range of PAEPs. There are PAEPs that are public and those that are private. They serve students from all SES and family backgrounds. Some have highly therapeutic components, other do not. Some have structured methods to develop community ties, while others allow community to establish itself, based on the caring and dedication demonstrated by staff. PAEPs may have no structured academic programs (as some free schools), semistructured academic programs (as in Madison Prep and Oakland), or highly structured academic programs (CPESS), but theoretically, all maintain that student interest, focus, and perspectives should drive curriculum and instruction. PAEPs also theoretically have shared decision making, which fosters community and ownership, requires students to develop reasoning and logic, and ultimately allows students to see the connections between school and society.

However, the very characteristics that make progressive alternatives alternative are also those that make legitimacy hard to establish: standardization is the impetus of legitimacy today, and this goes against the concept of progressive education.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Overview of the Study

This research utilized ethnographic and case study methodologies in order to examine cognition and motivation of 51 high school seniors in a progressive alternative learning program (PAEP) to better understand the social and academic learning that took place. These qualitative approaches are best suited to studies that set out to examine events in natural settings, with the goal of understanding situations in respect to the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It employed an emergent research design, wherein data collection and data analysis occur concurrently. This ongoing, cyclical approach allows for comprehension of the phenomenon being studied to be established along the way, and allows the researcher to pursue evolving patterns in additional rounds of data collection (Brause, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The research aimed to examine cognition and motivation within the context of one PAEP by exploring the experiences and interactions of students during the various aspects of this program, as well as their understandings of what takes place as they participate in the PAEP. Yin (1994) explains that the case study is advantageous when researchers are examining questions of what and why, in regards to real life
occurrences. The descriptive nature of case studies allows researchers to examine situations holistically and extrapolate potential patterns. In this particular study, the case study methodology served to further articulate the patterns identified in the data collection of the larger group by developing composite students.

This study documented the experiences and interactions of 51 high school seniors in a PAEP in a county north of New York City. The overarching goal of the study was to explore how the PAEP experience affects student cognition and motivation. The study attempted to explore what, how, and why students learn, as well as what, how, and why they are motivated to learn and act on their learning (productivity). The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the contexts in which students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
2. What do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
3. How do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
4. Why do students in a progressive alternative learning program make the decisions and choices they make?

As the researcher is an educator in a district that sends students into the program being studied, the researcher took a leave of absence from her teaching position in order to have as little impact on the students and staff involved in the study as possible. This offered the researcher the opportunity to become more closely connected to the community being observed. The ability to observe over the school year helped to foster a sense of trust between the participants and the researcher. The
extensive time at the study site helped maintain focus on recording the myriad of
details regarding what occurred.

This chapter will present the methodologies of the study. First, the conceptual
framework of the study will be explored. Next will be an explanation of the research
setting and participants. Following will be an overview of the data sources, collection
process, and data analysis for each question. Then a more detailed explanation of the
data collection and analysis procedures will be explored. The chapter will close with
a discussion regarding confidentiality, validity, and reliability.

Research Setting and Participants

The setting of this research project is a PAEP that is comprised of students
from 19 school districts which are part of a Board of Cooperative Educational
Services (BOCES) consortium. The individual districts are all within a 90-minute
drive to Manhattan. This PAEP was designed for high school juniors and seniors
(although juniors are rarely enrolled in the program). One of the two creators of the
program is on staff and also directs the program (recruiting, enrollment, funding,
informing parents, visiting high schools, etc.). The program is deemed successful
based on (though not limited to) the following: it is in its 28th year and continues to
receive funding from school districts, it reports over 92% of graduates enroll in
colleges and universities, it has been deemed effective by the New York State
Education Department, and it was named one of the top 40 experimentally oriented
programs in the United States by the National Institute of Education.

The site was selected for several reasons. The first reason is that this PAEP
seeks to enroll students who have potential, but are not (for a wide variety of reasons)
reaching that potential; they are disconnected from the mainstream system of academics. As one staff member stated, “The students at [site] are able to do great things, they just don’t see it. They don’t understand or believe in the connection between learning in school and doing. [PAEP] seems to find a way to show them that connection” (9/8/04). Many principals, guidance counselors, school board members, and family members of graduates echo these ideas. It is this connection between learning and doing, the impact that the connection has, and the students’ perceptions of the connection between their learning and doing that this study explored. The site is populated by students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and thus provides the opportunity to examine how diverse participants establish a community and what type of community they create to complete the challenge areas the program requires. The school district I work in participates in the program and sent four students in the year of the study. Finally, I am a graduate of the PAEP. These last two factors assisted in gaining access to the site.

There were a total of 54 students in the program being studied. All of the consenting students were a part of the observation and informal discussion aspects of the study and were invited to take the survey. The selection of focus groups and individual interviews was done through purposeful sampling (to be explained in detail in following section). The program is promoted in the BOCES consortium and by its staff as being designed for average to gifted juniors and seniors who could profit from a change from traditional high school environments and curriculum. The program uses academic, community, and career-oriented challenge areas to foster self-confidence, career direction and academic and life skills. The program defines its
goals as assisting students to develop confidence, skills, and future direction they will need to be successful in college and life. The students attending this PAEP are deemed by their prior academic record, teachers, guidance counselors, test scores, and/or the program director as "gifted," or "capable," but disconnected and not "reaching their potential."

The program holds state approval to grant local diplomas and New York State Regents credit. School districts pay to have students attend the program, but there is no direct cost to parents or guardians. The individual districts provide transportation, but many students drive and carpool to the campus. Participating districts send between 1 and 6 students, depending on what is funded in their yearly school budget.

While the students vary in culture, academic performance to date, and SES, it is important to note the similarities that exist. Although there is some economic diversity, the participating districts generally represent the wealthier towns in the 2 counties served. Furthermore, the students selected for the program must demonstrate academic potential according to the description above. The students also, for a variety of reasons to be explored in the study, chose to leave the mainstream system (selecting to disconnect from it physically as well as mentally). The process described below regarding admission further supports the notion that the students selected for the program probably have some level of self-empowerment in order to attempt entry.

The process of becoming a member of this learning community indicates a level of motivation on the part of the student participants in the study. Students interested in enrolling in the program go through a somewhat similar process to
enrolling in college, from showing initial interest, to being interviewed, to participation in an orientation.

The students are recruited from their home district through a similar process. The program director first visits all the district high schools that participate in the PAEP and gives a presentation about the program to the students. After his presentation, he invites students who are interested to either speak with their guidance counselors or contact him. He returns to the school to meet with the individual students who show interest. The director gathers information on prospective students from the district school staff (principals, guidance counselors, teachers), including information on past and present academic performance (grades, course selection, test scores), social interaction, and motivation. The next step is for the interested students to go through an interview process, where the director “tries to find a good fit” (author interview, 9/14/04) for the developing class. The criterion for this fit was only vaguely defined by the director. Prospective students are invited to come for a visit to the program to see where it is housed, experience a part of a class day, and to talk with the current class. The program director explained the acceptance processes as a combination of: student interest and potential for working and growing in the PAEP community (as perceived through initial meeting and subsequent interviews with potential students, making the program director the first gatekeeper of the program), discussion of potential students with program staff, and home school input (guidance counselors, principals). While district schools can make recommendations and the program staff has input, the program director makes the final decision; he is the first and most pertinent gatekeeper. The program director emphasized that as he
and the staff makes the final decisions regarding the following year’s class, strong attention is paid to finding a fit for students as individuals and as a community. In an initial meeting with the program director, he stated, “A large part of the (program) experience and of the success of the program has to do with the sense of community that gets established. Community is key, and finding the right mix, the right fit is crucial” (author interview, 9/13/04).

The program is housed on an extension site of the BOCES organization in two residential-type structures. There are similar buildings for other BOCES programs on the same campus. The PAEP runs from September to June (a standard school year) and is organized around six challenge areas; orientation, wilderness experience one and two (weeklong hiking trips, in the fall to the Catskill Mountains, and in the spring to the Adirondack Mountains), community service (a five-week service project), academics one and two (two ten-week-long sessions separated by internship), internship, and presentations and individual wrap-up. Parents and students are informed that while there are two designated blocks for academics, academics actually occur simultaneously with the other challenge areas throughout the course of the year. An overview of the year in terms of challenge areas is given in Table 2.

Successful participation in the program results in one academic credit each for the following courses; social studies, environmental science, health/life skills, and physical education. Students are also encouraged to take elective courses by pursuing areas that interest them. They work with a staff member to design their elective coursework. Some electives have been designed throughout the years and are offered
### Table 2 Flow Chart of PAEP Challenge Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Week One</th>
<th>Week Two</th>
<th>Week Three</th>
<th>Week Four</th>
<th>Week Five</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>* Orientation</td>
<td>* Orientation</td>
<td>* Orientation</td>
<td>* Wilderness Experience I</td>
<td>* Wilderness Experience I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Wilderness Experience I Preparation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wilderness Experience I Preparation</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>* Wilderness Experience II</td>
<td>* Community Service Preparation</td>
<td>* Community Service Project</td>
<td>* Community Service Project</td>
<td>* Community Service Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Preparation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Preparation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>* Community Service Project</td>
<td>* Community Service Project Evaluation</td>
<td>* Applied Academics I Introduction</td>
<td>* Applied Academics I</td>
<td>* Applied Academics I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project Evaluation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Community Service Project</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Community Service Project Evaluation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Internship</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internship</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internship</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internship</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internship</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>* Internship</td>
<td>* Internship</td>
<td>* Internship Evaluation</td>
<td>* Applied Academics II</td>
<td>* Applied Academics II</td>
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<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>*Applied Academics II</td>
<td>*Applied Academics II</td>
<td>*Applied Academics II Introduction</td>
<td>*Wilderness Experience II</td>
<td>*Wilderness Experience II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>*Applied Academics II</td>
<td>*Applied Academics II</td>
<td>*Wilderness Experience II Prepartion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>* Presentation/ Celebration</td>
<td>* Presentation/ Celebration</td>
<td>* Community Service</td>
<td>* Community Service</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
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</table>

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as "standard electives" such as Native American Studies (NAS), American Sign Language, Philosophy, and Photography. The staff is comprised of 10 individuals who share the roles and responsibilities of running the program. The program director is also the recruiter and a certified New York State teacher. There are four other New York State certified teachers, three teacher's aides, a social worker, and an administrator. These lines seem very clear, however the staff work together and, with the exception of the administrator, all staff members participate in facilitating classes and all other aspects of program. Two of the staff members are program graduates.

Access to Site

I contacted the program director the year prior to the study in order to discuss the possibility of conducting a study. Once the program director made the proposal to the staff of the PAEP, I was invited to discuss the nature of the study that was being planned and answer any questions they had. The staff, then, served as the first set of formal gatekeepers in regards to access to participants (Seidman, 1998). All staff agreed to participate in terms of allowing me access during their class time. Furthermore, staff offered opportunities for me to come on site visits as well as voluntarily providing information regarding their observations of and experiences with students.

At the beginning of the school year, I attended the orientation week with the students and staff, and had the opportunity to formally introduce the study to the student participants. The students were informed of the nature and purpose of the research and were encouraged to ask questions in the large group and to approach the me individually. A similar presentation was given to the parents and guardians at an
evening meeting, making up the second set of formal gatekeepers of the research participants (Siedman, 1998). For parents and guardians who were not at the meeting, letters were sent home with students. All participants (students, staff, and parents/guardians) were given a written explanation of the goals and scope of the study, as well as what was expected of them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). They were also given contact information for me, my program advisor, and the institutional review board in case there are any questions or concerns throughout the process of the study (Appendix A).

After the parent/guardian meeting, I reintroduced the research project to the students and obtained signed student informed consent. Students were again given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research. Students were also encouraged to ask questions that occurred to them throughout the study. They were told that they can elect to opt out of the study at any time, and that they did not need to participate in one part of the study to participate in other parts (they may choose to not fill out the survey and still be part of observation, focus groups, and interviews). Furthermore, they were informed that they did not have to participate in focus groups or interviews if they chose not to.

Research Design

In what ways do students attending a PAEP develop academically, socially, and emotionally? To examine this, the study examined the social and academic learning of high school seniors in a progressive alternative learning program. In attempting to capture an accurate depiction of the factors that shape and impact social and academic learning, multiple forms of data were collected. The data was
examined for patterns. Structural collaboration of the patterns noted in multiple sources lend credence to the study's findings (Delamont, 1992; Eisner, 1998).

The first section of the design focuses on the essential characteristics of qualitative research design. Next, because of the cyclical process of data collection and analysis, and because the same data sources and collection processes were used to examine the different questions in this study; an overview of the collection and analysis will be presented. Following this will be a description of the data collection processes. At the end of this section will be a description of the analysis of the various data sources to be collected.

**Essential Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

Merriam (2001) and Eisner (1998) both describe the essential characteristics of qualitative research. The articulation and application of these characteristics supply a strong framework for the current study. Qualitative research is concerned with discerning the ways participants construct meaning to understand their experiences. The current study examined how high school seniors make sense of their PAEP experience and how the experience was incorporated into their lives. The goal was to understand the phenomenon from within: from the participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Eisner (1998) explains that to accomplish this type of work, researchers must remain field focused. In being field focused, the researcher examines all aspects of that which is being researched. The people and the feelings of those involved, the environment, and all else relevant to what is being researched is integrated in the data collection and analysis of this type of study. To observe without being noticed is
valuable, (so that researchers limit their effect on observation) but such conditions are hard to establish, particularly when one is doing in-depth research on a community. In order to fully view and examine a community, a researcher benefits by becoming, to some degree, a part of the very thing that is being observed. In the current study, I participated in the community as a researcher/observer. By becoming a part of the community, in the sense of regular attendance and being present during many of the activities staff and students are involved in, I had access to events and occurrences that “outsiders” may not be privy to or aware of. Without the context of the whole community experience, only a limited understanding of the interactions and experiences of the participants can be obtained.

The second characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary tool for data collection (Eisner, 1998; Merriam, 2001). In this study I was the primary tool for data collection and analysis. The majority of the data collection relied on participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989), and an adapted version of Seidman’s (1998) phenomenological interviewing. Eisner (1998) describes how in studies where the researcher is the primary method of instrumentation, the quality of the data is correlated to the expertise of the observer. The more knowledgeable researchers are in a situation the more equipped they are to sift through the data to find significant, relevant patterns. I am a teacher with experience working with disconnected adolescents, and the population being studied fits this category. In addition to the current study, I have worked with colleagues to develop educational programs for youth with various issues of disconnection.
Merriam (2001) emphasizes the need for fieldwork in qualitative study. Researchers must actually be “on site” to observe the phenomenon being studied in its natural setting. In the current study, I attended the program regularly as an observer, to gather data and seek to gain the trust of the participants so that during interviews and focus groups they had confidence in and comfort with me. Eisner (1998) also discusses the need for researchers to stay on task and pay attention to details. Qualitative research involves taking extensive notes on the specifics of the situation. It is from these notes that researchers extract patterns. The in-depth nature of such study attempts to give it an accurate portrayal of a situation.

The fourth characteristic of qualitative research relates to how researchers describe events and interpret the data they collect. Eisner (1998) calls this the interpretive character. It is the search for why the event happened and what it means. The purpose behind qualitative research is to create hypotheses, concepts, or theories based on the observations and understandings gained from fieldwork (Merriam, 2001). In this study, I identified patterns and themes regarding the contexts in which students in a PAEP learn, what they learn, what influences their learning, and why they make the decisions that they make.

The next characteristic of qualitative study relates to descriptive voice (Eisner, 1998), which allows the researcher a personal voice and shows the reader the emotions and feelings of the situation being studied. This is particularly useful for qualitative case studies such as the current study, which attempt to delve deeply into a specific example of experience. It is a quite different approach from quantitative research, which predetermines the focus variables prior to understanding the total
context in which a phenomenon occurs. In this study, the words and experiences of the participants are used to recreate the panorama of experience in relation to their evolving social and academic learning.

Finally, Eisner (1998) tells us that qualitative research must be believable. The study must have enough data to validate its findings. Conducting this type of research is a dialogic process in which what is seen and understood is defined, examined and redefined (Dyson, 1995). It is the nature of qualitative case study research to explore every aspect of the case in its entirety, thus providing the researcher with thick, rich data to investigate. By observing the many different aspects of this PAEP, I attempted to discern patterns in regards to motivation and cognition. Then, using interpretive methodology (Erickson, 1986) which examines how people in specific situations understand daily experiences, focus groups and interviews were conducted to further explore patterns that are discerned during observations.

Overview of Data Collection and Data Analysis

In order to organize the subgroups which the composites students were constructed from and more to clearly define the methodology of the study, Table 3 provides a breakdown of the research questions and the subsequent data collection and analysis relating to each question.

Data Collection Processes

Data collection and analysis throughout this study were cyclical in nature. Initial themes and categories were inductively generated from observations, field notes (thick descriptions of students, and their interactions with staff, activities, and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources and Collection Processes</th>
<th>Data Analysis Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are the contexts in which students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?</strong></td>
<td>Observational Field notes • orientation • classes • independent study • field experiences • free time Informal conversation/ Field notes Survey Focus Groups Individual Interview Sessions</td>
<td>Identify themes Discourse analysis Identify differences across students Identify differences in participation/discourse in various contexts Identify similarities across students Identify similarities in participation/discourse in various contexts Cyclical/simultaneous analysis and collection to hone in on key concepts Generate and explore patterns through composites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?</strong></td>
<td>Observational Field notes • classes • independent study • field experiences • free time Informal conversation/ Field notes Survey Focus Groups Individual Interview Sessions</td>
<td>Identify themes Discourse/content analysis Coding reoccurring concepts/themes through OneNote Cyclical/simultaneous analysis and collection to hone in on key concepts Generate and explore patterns through composites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?</strong></td>
<td>Observational Field notes • classes • independent study • field experiences • free time Informal conversation/ Field notes Survey Focus Groups Individual Interview Sessions</td>
<td>Identify themes Discourse/content analysis Cyclical/simultaneous analysis and collection to hone in on key concepts Generate and explore patterns through composites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why do students in a progressive alternative learning program make the decisions and choices they make?</strong></td>
<td>Observational Field notes • orientation • classes • independent study • field experiences • free time Informal conversation/ Field notes Survey Focus Groups Individual Interview Sessions</td>
<td>Identify themes Discourse/content analysis Cyclical/simultaneous analysis and collection to hone in on key concepts Generate and explore patterns through composites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
each other), and survey data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Erickson, 1986). While the latter stages of data analysis are relatively easy to describe (once issues and themes have been identified, it is becomes a matter of exploring data sources for examples), gaining initial understanding of the data and singling out the major patterns is somewhat intuitive. In the initial stages of a research project the work “is as much implicit as explicit” (Bryman & Burgess 1994, p. 12).

From these initial themes, a constant comparative method of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to provide feedback that shaped the methodological and analytical aspects of the study. Content from prior data collection was analyzed and questions developed to clarify the emerging patterns and my understandings. This ongoing analysis provided a deeper understanding of the issues being explored and helps to clarify the data being collected.

The study began with observation of the whole participant set. From here I aimed to refine the sample using a mix of participant volunteerism for deeper levels of study and purposeful sampling (to be described in following section on focus groups). The selection process is outlined in Figure 3.

Observations.

Hubbard and Powell (1993) state that observations help teachers/researchers understand the students’ world from the students’ perspective. Observations have the value of being done in the natural environment of that which is studied and the data collected during observation is first hand (Merriam, 2001). The notes the researcher makes are a key tool for observational research methodology. Observational research notes can be broken down into the following four categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992;
Figure 3. Selection Process and Participant Delineation

Data Collection: Interviews
N: 4 Students,
Selection Process: Participated in All Prior Data Collection, Purposeful Sampling

Data Collection: Formal Focus Groups
N: 5 Groups, 4-6 Students Each Group,
2-3 meetings per group
Selection Process: Student & Parent/Guardian Informed Consent; Student Volunteering to Participate in Focus Groups, Purposeful Sampling, Evaluation of Impact on Student Volunteers with School Social Worker

Data Collection Process: Survey
N: 34
Selection Process: Student and Parent Guardian Informed Consent; Student Volunteering to Fill Out Survey

Data Collection Stage: Observation, Informal Discussion
N: 51
Selection Process: Student and Parent Guardian Informed Consent Paperwork
Hubbard & Powell, 1993):

1. Field notes: direct observations of actions reactions, interactions,

2. Methodological notes: notes to researcher self on how to enhance research or make changes for more productive data collection,

3. Theoretical notes: researcher’s hunches as to what is going on and why things are occurring as they do. The researcher’s guess as to why things are happening,

4. Personal notes: where researcher notes own actions and reactions that might taint field notes. This is particularly important for analysis to be valid, noting how researcher may bias note taking.

Because of the value of documenting all aspects of the phenomenon being researched, note taking was done during all components of data collection. At the end of each site visit the notes were typed into the computer program “OneNote” and additional insights, observations, and ideas were added (Appendix B). Microsoft OneNote was selected as the word/data processing program because of the particular features it allows. The flexible design allowed typewritten and handwritten (using a tablet PC or a pen input device) notes (including diagrams and pictures), allowed for recording notes (which were synchronized with typed/handwritten notes) and data, and allowed pictures and text from the Web and other devices to be immediately dragged into the program, automatically including the citation of the source for easy referencing and retrieval. The program also allow me to create multiple notebooks, folders, and pages as needed, and allowed me to customize these to best fit the project, which was useful to this in-depth study. The program’s search options allowed all the data to be searched for specific material without needing to know
exactly where in a project folder it was, and there is a flagging system that allowed me to highlight, search, and categorize the data in a variety of ways. It also has a special function that allows for "floating notes" which move from section to section. OneNote is compatible with other Microsoft Office System programs, which allows for sharing of information with the research site and with my prior work. Another reason OneNote was selected was that as soon as data is put into the program it is saved (unlike other programs that need to be told to save, and may only allow it at certain time intervals), thus there was little chance of a loss of information.

The field notes taken during observations were paramount to the study. As stated above, I was granted access to almost all components of the program, by both staff and students. Because of the willingness of the entire community, I had access to formal and informal periods (classes, electives, study sessions, free time, meetings, field work, etcetera). This form of data was particularly helpful in establishing the composite students. This is because the daily activities, interactions, and reflections of the individual participants were recorded, thus I was able to track their actions/interactions, and question them when I choose about the motivations and impacts of these. This information then helped to establish the patterns and themes that were used to categorize the students into the three groups which ultimately would inform the three invented composite students (Mary, Chris, and John) discussed in chapters IV through VII. Thus the each composite is an amalgamation of a section of the entire participant set. All student participant quotes are attributed to one of these three composites, based on which one the actual quoted participant contributed to the creation of.
Merriam (2001) indicates that speculation is a significant factor in developing theories in qualitative studies. With this in mind, ideas, inferences, and developing concepts were explored in the following way: first they were noted in the field notes and then I inspected previous data for emerging patterns. At the subsequent site visit, I looked for further information, and finally I discussed these insights in both formal and informal discussion with participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Figure 4 represents the relationship between the data collection and analysis. This process, along with informing the data, helped temper my own subjectivity. Being aware of one’s own subjectivity is imperative in research so as to prevent or at least reduce the influence it may have on the investigation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Peshkin, 1988).

It is important to take notes during all aspects of the research to provide rich descriptions of what occurs as this facilitates a cyclical process of understanding the data (Brause, 2000), it builds validity and reliability by providing data for structural collaboration, and can help to understand the greater context of a given situation.
Figure 4. Relationship Between Data Collection and Analysis of Study

- Explore data for emerging patterns
- Site observations and field notes
- Explore prior data for similarities and differences
- Return to site for continued exploration of emerging patterns (continues throughout study)
- Explore prior data emerging patterns
- Informal discussion with participants regarding emergent patterns.

Survey

A survey was designed and administered during the first academic block (Appendix C). The main goal of the survey was to help gain a global understanding of the reasons why students said they were in the PAEP and what they hoped to get out of the experience. Students were informed that the survey would help provide a basis for the rest of the research project, that they would have 45 minutes in class to work on the survey, and that they could take the survey home if to complete it and return it to the program administrator, to me, or to a designated spot. I also informed students they did not have to take the survey in order to participate in other aspects of the
research, that they did not have to answer all of the survey questions, and they could choose to put their name on the survey or keep it anonymous. Finally, they were assured that only I would be reading the surveys. Students who were absent were given the opportunity to complete surveys on a subsequent day. Allowing for anonymity, allowing students to select which questions to answer, and ensuring students that only the researcher will be reading the surveys were intended to encourage students to share honestly.

Formal Focus Groups

After the surveys and field notes were initially examined, students were asked to volunteer to participate in a series of formal focus groups. I explained how the focus groups would run. I stated that the students would be given a general list of topics I was interested in exploring, but they would direct the conversation. I then asked student participants to provide their internet mailing address if they would like to volunteer, so that I could arrange times for the groups. By doing this I was attempting to provide participants with the opportunity to identify whether they want to participate or not without having the information made public. I reviewed the list of students volunteers with the school social worker to identify and exclude from the pool of participants any students who were in situations or crises that participation in focus groups and interviews might exacerbate. Different student participants were invited to meet on different days, and I continued with observation and informal discussions with all participants. This limited "public" awareness of which participants were participating in specific parts of the research. From the remaining pool of possible participants, the selection of focus groups and individual interviews
was done through purposeful sampling. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) indicate that such sampling (selecting a sample from which the most data can be collected and learned from) makes sense in qualitative studies, as the point is to gain deep understanding and insight into the phenomena being studied.

In creating a purposeful sample, researchers must establish criteria to determine which sample will provide the richest data. For this study, there were three criteria used to select focus groups and three criteria to select individual interviews. The first criterion (for both) was that participants showed an interest in being part of the study. The rationale for this was that the participants who take interest (asking questions, discussing notes, sharing insight and experiences without being asked) would provide the most in-depth information during formal discussions. The second criterion (for both) was that participants had to have consistent attendance in all aspects of the program. The rationale for this criterion was two-fold. First, it was important to be able to rely on all students being present for their assigned focus groups. Second, the nature of the program affords the students many opportunities to be off the campus, including the community service, internship, and wilderness experiences. It is reasonable to assume that the students who purposefully and willingly attended all of the components would provide more in depth data regarding motivation and cognition. The logic of purposeful sampling is to select the sample that will provide the richest information on what is being studied (Patton, 1990). The third criterion (for the individual interviews) was that participants needed to be a part of the focus groups. This allowed for an even deeper exploration of patterns identified in other aspects of data collection.
There were 4 focus groups, 3 consisting of 5 participants and one of 6. These groups met 2 to 3 times, for 45 minutes to an hour each. A 5th focus group was conducted after these, when 4 participants (from different groups) asked if they could come and talk with me more. Participants were made aware of groups and provided with three possible times to meet. All meetings occurred during lunch and I provided lunch (pizza and soda). Focus groups were recorded and notes were taken. Recordings were transcribed and information on pauses, tone, and body language noted in field notes was incorporated.

While creating questions, researchers must “make sure the question is open-ended enough to allow possibilities the researcher has not imaged to emerged” (Hubbard & Powell, 1993, p. 5). The initial questions (Appendix D) for the focus groups were created from patterns that evolved from observations and survey data. As the focus groups progressed (one group to the next) the question set was revised and refined. I explained that the questions were to serve as a guide but that the participants should direct the conversation, as it was their insights and understandings of their experiences that I was trying to uncover. The “questions” were open ended, and attempted to elicit a conversation that flowed from the participants. Participants were informed of the possibility of follow-up focus groups and were invited to read the transcription and field notes, to offer comments. This is known as member checking and brings an added measure of reliability to the findings, allowing the researcher access to the intentions and perceptions of participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). One participant asked to do this and he also asked to be in the 5th focus group.
**Formal Interviews.**

From these groups, 4 participants were selected for individual interviews. Each student participated in an interview that continued the veins of conversation started in the focus groups with regards to their program experiences, learning, and motivation. The participants were selected based on a growing understanding of the three types of students that seemed to be involved in the program. The interviews were a crucial step in developing the composite students.

Like the focus groups, the interviews were designed as a conversation. The interviews will be a part of the evolving dialogs between participants and me. An open-ended, dialogic nature fosters a non-threatening environment where participants are encouraged to openly discuss their experiences and perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

**Data Analysis**

The data collected in this study for all four questions underwent a cyclical analysis. Analysis was an ongoing part of the data collection. Merriam (2001) describes this as a more enlightened than waiting to conduct analysis after all of the data is collected. In fact, the approach of conducting at least rudimentary analysis as the data is being collected is considered by many to be the “right” way of conducting qualitative studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 2001).

For all four questions, the initial analysis will took place daily, as data was being collected and transcribed into OneNote. I kept a running list of themes, patterns, and questions, and used OneNote software to track these. I have used OneNote software for prior work (including the pilot study), and have found it helpful.
in managing, exploring, and searching transcribed research data. Furthermore, the program allows for memo writing and category creation (both important aspects of coding and categorizing). Throughout the study analysis was conducted and themes were revised and/or confirmed. I developed a list of concepts, noting consistencies and inconsistencies that emerged in regards to the research questions. Then I further examined these patterns through the variety of data sources and field notes.

Additionally, I taped all of the focus groups and interviews transcribed them into OneNote. The transcription of data (observational field notes, focus groups, and interviews) was then read and I made memo notes regarding the research questions.

The first question examined the contexts in which the high school seniors in this PAEP learn. In exploring this question, I was looking for data that examined the learning environments of the PAEP as well as for data that provided a sense of the students’ understanding of the environments in which they learn. This was important because in order to understand if and how students are learning in progressive alternative learning programs, we must understand how students perceive the contexts within which they are experiencing learning. This also provided insight into the meta-cognitive processes of students which helped to uncover the ways that PAEP influence both motivation and cognitive processing. Initial themes were constructed from my observations and field notes. Once these initial themes emerged, I used discourse analysis to further explore the patterns. The field notes for observation in various environments also provided information regarding similarities and differences in student ideas about the contexts in which they learn. The survey was analyzed using content analysis procedures, highlighting and coding major similarities and
differences of experience among responders. Finally, student interactions (with content, staff, peers, and others) in their different learning contexts were explored. Using discourse and content analysis, data from informal conversations, focus groups, and interviews was explored to identify how students understand the ways they interact in their various learning contexts.

The next research question explored what students in the PAEP learn. This question aimed to uncover a global perspective of what the students in a PAEP learn. As with the other research questions, data collection for this question branched beyond the student classes to their experiences in other aspects of the program, including the community service and internship components, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the learning that was taking place. Through content and discourse analysis, learning concepts were identified and tracked throughout the year. These concepts were coded into OneNote and flagged each time they were referred to. Throughout the study, I kept frequency counts of student initiation and participation (in discussions, field trips, assignments, workshops) in various “learning themes”, in an attempt to explore the length and depth (staying power and impact) of the learning.

The third question used similar data analysis processes to the second question. The third question explored how students in a PAEP learn. The question aimed at exploring experiences and contexts that promote and support student learning as well as those that may hinder or thwart student learning. The focus group and interview transcriptions were coded using discourse analysis to identify overt and covert examples of the influences on student learning.
The last question explored the motivation behind choices (academic, social, and plans for the future) students in the PAEP made. Motivation plays a crucial role in the level and amount of learning that takes place. As the theoretical rationale and literature review indicate, the level and locus of motivation can impact immensely on what students do, or do not do. PAEP like the one being studied attempt to empower students to claim an internal locus of control and to intrinsically pursue their studies. Using observational field notes, and focus group and interview transcription, a content and discourse analysis was conducted to first identify patterns of choices and then examine the underlying motivation for these choices.

The experiences of the larger class were illuminated by the creation of three composite students. Each composite "student" was composed of a number of students from the study and each composite articulates generally the experience of each of the three "groups" identified in the study. Thus, the comments and experiences of the three composites actually represent the entire group. The participants who made up the composites were categorized by three measures. First, they had similar motivations for entering the PAEP, based on the survey data, their participation in the orientation, and early informal conversations. The next identifier (based on the same data sources) was that the participants had relatively similar perceptions about schooling. Additional data that contributed to the categorization of the emerging composites was gathered through observations and informal conversation from the challenge area of applied academics one. The final factor that helped to establish the composites was the level and type of participation in the separate challenge areas. Overall, the composites were made up of "like-minded" and
“like-driven” students: students who seemed to think and act in similar ways, based on their words and actions. The designation of similar mindsets and drive took into consideration the answers students provided on the survey, informal conversation with students (regarding pre-PAEP experiences, reasons for applying for and entering the PAEP, hopes and goals for the PAEP experience and beyond, and attitudes and beliefs about education), and observable actions the students took during the study year. The first composite represented about one quarter of the students. The second composite represented the majority of the PAEP students. The final composite, represented a small (about 10%) but important section of the student body. This will be further articulated in the next chapter.

Confidentiality

When working with human participants, ethical considerations are of paramount importance. Noddings (1986) tells us that “when teachers are the direct objects of our research, we run the risk of wronging them as persons” (page 506). The same is true for students. In addition to member checking for accuracy of data, all participants were given pseudonyms for this research study. Staff members were simple referred to as staff.

Validity and Reliability

The cyclical nature of the data collection-analysis procedures employed in this study provided evidence of triangulation, which Delamont (1992) defines as a strategy for defending this type of research by providing evidence of two or more examples of a particular finding from different perspectives, directions, or positions in the study. Eisner (1998) uses the term structural collaboration for research that has
the ability to support conclusions through a convergence of multiple data sources. The current study utilized observations, informal discussion, formal focus groups and interviews, and an open ended survey to provide ample opportunities to examine motivation and cognition from many angles.

Observation is a tool of research when it serves a formulated research purpose, is planned deliberately, is systematically recorded, and is subjected to checks and controls (validity and reliability) (Merriam, 2001). Wolcott (1992) says that researcher-observers are trained and mentally prepared to observe something particular and that this makes them very different from casual everyday observers. Researcher-observers observe only a few things and generally pay close attention to things other people hardly notice at all.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate that reality is constructed in the minds of the people who experience that reality. In other words, we interpret our lives, and the reality that exists in any given situation is constructed by our perceptions of the situational context. This makes understanding the perspective of the participants paramount. As the researcher in qualitative study is the primary tool for research (Eisner, 1998), the method of access to the participants’ perspectives must be manifold and extensive: the more contact and opportunities to observe and communicate, the more data will be collected. Merriam indicates that in this type of research, researchers should try to understand the perspective of participants in order to “uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, 2001, p. 203). Reliability, then, is served by being sure the findings match the data that is collected.
The varied sources and in-depth observations will be an effective methodology to reduce subjectivity (Lancy, 1993).
CHAPTER IV

ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY

The objective of this study was to examine motivation and learning (social and academic) as realized by high school students in one progressive alternative education program (PAEP). Chapter IV begins with an exploration of the philosophy and organization of the program as this created the backdrop for identifying the students' motivations and learning throughout the year. This will be accomplished by first exploring the physical and pedagogical framework of the program and then exploring the motivations of the students for entering the program. The chapter will continue with a brief description of the patterns that were identified related to motivation and learning. The chapter concludes with a description of how the three student exemplars (composites) were established. This organization provides the framework for Chapter V through VII which will explore the patterns identified in the study through an examination of the themes through the experiences of 3 exemplar students. Chapter VIII summarizes the findings, generates hypothesis, and provides suggestions for future areas of research.

Physical Description

The PAEP that was the study site was situated on a centrally located campus, and is a part of a larger Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), a local
education agency which acts as a regional center and offers support to local school districts. The PAEP being studied is located on an ancillary campus of the main BOCES campus. This location is home to various BOCES programs. The PAEP being studied is located on the perimeter of this campus, and is housed in two buildings, next door to each other. The section where the PAEP was housed will be known herein as the campus. Each building has two floors. Across the driveway, there are two similar buildings that house a separate alternative high school program. The students in the other alternative high school have been assigned there, having been assigned from their district school for various behavioral, academic, and attendance issues. While students in the PAEP being studied also report having similar issues in their district schools as those of the students in the other alternative program, the two groups are distinct in several ways: the PAEP students applied (self-selection) to the PAEP, were selected (by staff) to attend, and enjoy different freedoms from the students in the other alternative high school, including unsupervised breaks, off campus privileges, and the various challenge areas of the PAEP. During the course of the study, students made comparisons between the two programs and to their status as students in the PAEP as opposed to being part of the other alternative program. These references highlight their understanding of the public school system they attended (known herein as the district school), and of our larger society. They also provide potential insight to the reasons students may have been motivated to act in certain ways.

Of the two buildings that make up the PAEP being studied, one has three classrooms and a large storage room for equipment used in the various challenge
areas of the program. The other building houses two classrooms, a student lounge, and various offices for the staff. Students and staff move from room to room and building to building in order to attend classes and participate in various aspects of the program. Many of the students drive to the school alone or in carpool groups, and their parking area is directly in front of the second school building. There is a wide open grassy area with a picnic table and bushes and trees surrounding the area, creating a “back yard” of sorts at the entrance to the first building. Students often congregate during their break times in this area, socializing in a variety of ways.

The classrooms are multi-use. The main meeting room, housed in building one, is set up with chairs running around the periphery. There is a chalkboard on which a staff member writes the day’s agenda, as well as other notes to students from staff, and another board that is used for staff- and student-created messages relating to specific classes. Neither board is generally used during classes held in the room. Instead, the staff uses easel paper and markers, often posting the material developed during lessons on the wall of the meeting room or in the hallways.

The lounge is student space, and is essentially student designed. During the study year there were plants, posters, lockers (very few locked), furniture (including bean bags and blankets that the students brought in), and other decorations. This is a location in which the staff rarely ventured; it is student space. The staff likewise has its’ own space, including a suite of offices on the first floor of building one. On the door of this suite, there was a note stating that students should knock and wait for a response before they enter. However, the door was rarely shut, and students were often in the staff suite. Students were constantly in and out of the staff space.
Connections Between Physical and Philosophical Space

The philosophy of the program is reflected in the physical structure and set up of the classes. The program is described by the director as one that provides transition from adolescence to adulthood with a focus on building self-esteem and making a difference in the world. One of the goals of the program is to teach students that their direction is determined by the choices that they make, from how they spend their free time to the way they go about obtaining a community service project and internship. The instruction in these matters ranged from direct and explicit to covert and subtle. In order to facilitate student understanding of the impact of choices, the staff articulated the reasons behind policies and procedures, and how the choices students made in regard to these would set their course in one direction or another. The policy on lateness was a strong example. During the first week, the staff discussed a variety of times the importance of being on time for classes and groups. The reasons provided included, “not holding the group up, not short-changing yourself, showing respect for the program” (program director, 9/9/04). When students were late for a class or for the school day, there was very little attention drawn to the student. There were no bells, no late passes; students came in and told
the office manager they were present and then went into class. One student, who was late during the first week a number of times, shared his view on how the staff handled the situation and how it impacted him:

It was like [district school] but different. Like, they both want you to be on time, but here, it isn’t about getting in trouble, getting a detention, getting a call home. The first day, when I was hours late, [program director] just came over and asked if everything was ok. When I explained what happened, and it was a really lame excuse, he just said, “Oh. Well, we missed you. Try not to be late again; you don’t want to miss out on stuff.” Then, that week I was late for a class with [staff member] and he was like, “So, man, where were you?” He didn’t even say it during class. When I walked in he was just like, “Hey, glad you’re here, man.” And it wasn’t sarcastic like at my old school. He really meant it. That’s when I started to realize that I really was missing out by being late. I am still working on it, but this is the first place where I feel like they treat me like an adult, like, they respect that I might actually be doing something important, not just goofing off. The stuff that goes on here, what we do. It’s the first time I really don’t want to be late. And it makes sense to me, for the first time, that I am robbing me and the class by being late. It just makes sense here, because maybe we are all involved. I don’t know. (John, 10/7/04)

The way time is perceived and used reflects the physical and philosophical domain of the PAEP. Time is used by the staff; they are not dictated by time, and they model this concept for the students constantly. In terms of the total program, the challenge areas are designed to be somewhat flexible so that individual students have tailored experiences to fit their goals.

The program is organized into six challenge areas. As described earlier, these challenge areas comprise the six components in the school year that aim to help the students in the transition between adolescence and adulthood. These challenge areas attempt to provide students with specifically structured and supported opportunities to challenge themselves academically, socially, physically, and professionally. The six areas are labeled in the program as orientation, wilderness experience one and two.
(week-long hiking trips in the fall to the Catskill Mountains and, in the spring to the more challenging Adirondack Mountains), community service (a five-week service project of the student’s design), applied academics one and two (ten-week-long sessions separated by internship), internship (a ten-week career project of the student’s design), and presentations (celebrations)/individual wrap-up.

The program director informed the students prior to the start of the year (and again during orientation) and the parents/guardians at the parent night that the year is designed to put growing responsibility and choice on the students, and that as the year progresses, the challenges and the rewards get bigger. This is clear in the structure of the program year: the orientation has many open-ended activities, informal talk time, and community-building work. It is designed wherein students who are uncomfortable with any given activity are not pushed or coerced. In fact, one student at one point excused herself for an afternoon and later commented on the experience:

If they had made me do that [activity] I probably would have dropped out right there. Even if they made a big deal that I didn’t do it. But [staff member] just let me go see [another staff member]. She [second staff member] sat and listened to what I was thinking, and then let me just relax until I was ready to go join the group. And nobody made a big deal about it. It wasn’t that I felt normal, but I felt accepted. (Dana, 11/22/04)

This orientation period is really an orientation for the students and the staff. This period of time is used for the entire group to come together and establish who, what, and how the PAEP was going to be for that particular year. A senior staff member indicated this about new groups and the orientation: “While many things remain constant throughout the years, each group has its own flavor. We all come to the experience new, and we have to meld together, to become.”
As the group moves into the first wilderness experience, they use the community that they established during orientation to support each other in their guided survival out in the wilderness. Each subsequent challenge area in the year, likewise, builds upon the previous experiences.

Another example of the perception of consistency between the physical setting and the philosophical domain of the PAEP relates to the daily/weekly schedule that is posted by the staff. These are considered works-in-progress. While the general flow of each day is outlined, the actual amount of time dedicated to any given activity is very flexible. If students are highly engaged in a particular activity, the staff allows more time to that particular activity. This was not always a group decision among staff; at times one staff member decided to extend a few minutes for a particular group, at other times, the staff checked in with one another and came to a consensus.

During the orientation, there were several activities where staff came around to different rooms to see if the groups were finished. During one activity, there was a group that was taking longer to complete the task. Instead of rushing the students to finish, the staff member told the time checker (another staff member) that his group would, “need about 5 more minutes. We just got really into planning how to do it and lost track of time” (staff, 9/8/04).

Students had various opinions and perspectives on this. It was frustrating for some students: “I can’t understand. We have a date book, and spent all of this time in health learning about time management, and [staff member] can’t ever get his class out on time. Hasn’t he been here from the beginning? I love him and all, but it doesn’t seem fair to the rest of the staff, or to us, when we are waiting to go to
lunch!” (John, 11/29/04), and valued for others: “It’s the first time a teacher actually put their own agenda aside to treat me and the curriculum as important. I can’t believe my whole school life teachers have forced the learning into set periods. Here, if the learning is still going on, so is the class, until an acceptable stopping point. Even then, the staff lets us stay if we want to, or do a come back, or returns to the topic at the next class. Where have you ever seen that?” (Chris, 5/10/05). The use of time helped to foster both a sense of community and of individuality. The perception that students had of being given the time they needed, helped students get a sense that what they had to say mattered. “They (staff) actually care that we are into it: learning. They like, want us to learn, and give us the time even if it interferes with their (staff’s) plans” (Marie, 10/12/04). Having what they had to say valued in this way seemed to foster their own patience in giving others the time they needed, which was a part of the community development. There were times too, when students felt frustrated about the pace set by the staff and their peers. One student expressed this frustration midway through the year: “I sometimes hate that [staff member] clowns around so much. It’s like he is trying to use up time until the next break, and I feel like that is the same thing that happened at [district school]. I just want to get on with it already. Let’s go!!” (John, 12/8/04).

The orientation period had many breaks built into the day which provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate and explore their individuality, while the other activities were geared toward community development. The open, unsupervised break time served a variety of purposes connected to the philosophical underpinnings of the program. The amount and length of these breaks during
orientation ranged from 5 to 20 minutes, and offered students the opportunity to mingle and get to know each other. The breaks were surrounded by a series of activities focused on team building and the establishment of group and personal goals. One student shared a journal entry with me where she reflected on her experience during the orientation period which ties together the physical space and structure of the program to the philosophical underpinnings of choice, community and self-determination:

It seemed at the time that there was a lot of free time, but looking at it now, I think that is all part of the plan. They wanted (maybe needed) us to get together, to connect, to form [names the program and year]. So we had time to show each other who we were, and to work on figuring out who we wanted to be. Those things couldn’t be done during classes. But then the classes help us come together. All the games, it wasn’t really games. It was also in the plan, because as we’re figuring out who we are and what we wanted out of the year, they also have us doing all these group things where we have to rely on each other, and share ourselves. So, it was a sneaky little plan (jk) [just kidding]. We built a bond with each other, and at the same time, we were coming to an understanding about finding and following our own truth. (Marie, 11/18/04)

There were continuous implicit and explicit reminders of the idea of free choice determining life course. These were written on papers that contained class information, on easels and boards, or openly stated, with or without articulation of the idea, and other times, there were references to the idea, such as, “That’s an interesting choice” and “Why would you do that?”

This philosophy of choice and self-determination ties into the physical structure of the PAEP. The students were given many choices about where and how they placed themselves during the various components of the year. In group meetings and during most classes, students sat in the folding chairs, on the floor, or in crazy
creeks (ground sitting camp chairs). Students selected the electives that they were interested in, and created electives other than the ones that were offered. During established classes, students revised and revised the curriculum to fit their needs and interests. During the period when students had work study (a period of time they used for networking, completing assignments, exploring topics of interest) students used the whole PAEP campus. As described by a student:

We have a room for work study where the computers and [staff members] are, but we can pretty much do what we need to. They don’t tell us what to do. Like in most classes, we are directing ourselves. So, like, in work study, I can just tell them I am leaving to work with another staff member, or I can say I want to go to a different room or outside, and it’s cool. They trust us because they know we know what we have to get done. (John, 11/8/04)

This reflects some key elements in the physical, philosophical, pedagogical, and social space of the program. Students made informed choices to move towards their goals and they explored the pathways to lead them there. One staff member, mid-way through the year described the connection between the physical and philosophical space of the program as:

directly related. We want students to see that their choices are what determine their direction, and their direction determines how they will feel about and what they will get out of their lives. If we force them to sit in a certain spot, to use independent time in a particular way, how are we letting them determine their path? It’s important to provide an environment where they have many chances to make their own choices. (1/19/05)

The program presents many opportunities for students to determine and alter their course and to reevaluate the choices they make in relation to the path that they want to be on. Some of these opportunities are highly structured and staff created, as is the case throughout the year when students are expected to formally reflect on their goals and state of progress. During the orientation period (9/8/04 through 9/23/04),
the students have a chance to reflect on who they are, who they want to be, and what they want out of life. Students created a list of goals for the course of the year, and for later on in life. They also collaboratively developed a list of expectations they had for the year. These group and individual goals were referred to directly and indirectly throughout the year. Prior to and at the conclusion of each challenge area, students were given a chance to reflect on (the prior challenge area and in preparation for the next one) on their goals. In preparation for the first applied academics sessions (see Table 2), a staff member discussed with the students in a small group the idea that the goals they wrote might change over the course of the year:

You may feel now that you don't feel as committed to certain things on your list as you did when you started. That's ok, it's good even. Maybe there is something you really want to add, something that has only recently become valuable to you. That is one of the great things about reflecting on your goals. It keeps you on your path, helps you really figure out the direction you want to go, and you are always in control of your direction then, actively. (10/8/04)

After that session, a group of students discussed the idea of determining their paths. "Maybe that is why they keep the group goals posted? So that we can figure out what is still important to us?" (Marie, 10/8/04). While there were many opportunities to re-examine individual goals throughout the year, the students' collective goals for the program were only revisited one time, midway through the year. These goals were, however, referred to throughout the year. At times, this was done in support of student actions: "I like the way you helped her get through her fear of making the phone calls [to obtain a community service project]. The way you all [3 students] role-played is a great way to work towards what you all said you wanted to do this year [pointing to the group goals list]" (field notes, 10/18/04). Other times,
it seemed that the staff made reference to these goals to help guide the students who
they felt might be straying from the goals that they set for themselves. The following
is an example of one such interchange, where a staff member speaks with a student
regarding the student not taking academic responsibility for creating his resume:
“Weren’t you the one who added to the group goals ‘want the chance to do things’?
You know we want you to have that chance, but in order for it to happen, you need to
take the opportunity to do it. The resume is what is going to help you get a great
internship, a chance to do something” (12/13/04).

Other opportunities were more informal and often student initiated. It was
typical for students to seek out staff members for guidance with regard to a variety
issues, including academic, career related (for instance how they could pursue a
particular elective, community service project, or internship), and interpersonal (how
to deal with relationship issues with family and friends). The students used the time
built into the learning day (breaks, work study) to seek out staff members, in addition
to setting up more formal appointments with them.

A last item to note with regard to the connection between the physical and
philosophical space of the program is the way that the community was fostered and
established by both the students and the staff. Commitment to the community
(PAEP, staff, peers) impacted student actions and decisions throughout the study year
and so evolution of the community became a focus of the study.

One of the activities during orientation was to review the rules and regulations
of the PAEP. The staff member who was directing this session spent time explaining
to the students each reason for each regulation and then discussed how their choices
and actions during their program year would be a direct reflection not only on them as individuals, but also a reflection on the program, on their program year, and on all the students of years past and years to come. The staff member communicated that there were many freedoms that the students would have for being a part of the PAEP, and that those freedoms came with a great deal of responsibility as well. There was discussion about the off-campus privileges for lunch and returning to class on time, as well as discussion about how the community service and internship challenge areas would also bring the students off campus and the type of image they would want to project and why. One student commented after the session, “I never thought of it like that before. That like, we are part of a long string of (participants in this PAEP). That’s a lot of responsibility” (John, 9/8/04).

Student-Stated Reasons for Enrolling in PAEP

Students select to both apply and to enroll, if accepted, in the PAEP that was studied. Students seemed to think that their reasons for applying were similar, as evidenced by many informal conversations where students indicated similarities in reasons for application: “We all wanted to get away” (Chris, 9/9/04), “Everyone was looking for more” (Marie, 11/29/04), “We all were different” (John, 6/2/05). There were actually a variety of reasons students applied to the program. Based on information gathered early in the program through informal conversation, observation of the orientation period, and the survey students filled out in the first semester, several reasons emerged. The following exploration will provide a backdrop for the composites described in Chapter V, and some of the changes that occurred over the course of the year.
When students were directly asked about why they chose to enter the PAEP, the responses always expressed a desire for one or more of the following: connection and community, applied learning, and the opportunity to do something/accomplish something valuable to themselves and to the world. Many of the students knew about the program from previous participants, and each of these students stated they “knew this was the place for me” (John, 10/18/04). Other students indicated they were “desperate to get a chance, any chance, for a change, something more” (Marie, 9/9/04). While most students appeared nervous and excited in the first days of the orientation, there was a small faction that seemed more reserved. Students in this category indicated over the course of the first months that they were not sure what to expect, and that they had had “relatively decent school experiences. I didn’t like to go, but it wasn’t horrible” (John, 10/6/04). Another student put it succinctly, “If I didn’t get in, I still probably would have had a good senior year” (Marie, 9/14/04).

Many participants indicated that they wanted to use the year as a chance to figure out what they wanted to do in life, e.g.: “It seems like the whole program is designed to help figure out how to get the most out of your life. I have no idea what I want to do. I want to do a lot, and I’m hoping [program] will help me figure a plan out” (Marie, 9/21/04), “I came because it is the only place I felt I could actually start living my life” (John, 9/8/04).

All of the students indicated that they chose to enter the program. Students repeatedly indicated, from orientation through the end of the year celebrations, that they made the choice to attend the program:

I remember the first day, being so nervous and unsure, but I knew I wanted to be here. I belonged here. And even on that first hiking trip, in the rain
and as miserable as I could be, I still knew I belonged here. During the few classes that were boring. Yep, still knew I wanted to be here. After years of never wanting to be in school, that’s just, it’s amazing to me. (Marie, 6/1/05)

Even when students were experiencing periods of stress, such as trying to obtain a community service or internship project, during particularly challenging academic courses, or preparing for and delivering presentations, students continued to indicate that they wanted to be part of the program.

Speaking with the program director about the reasons students give for selecting the program and the types of goals students reported during an activity where they create group goals for the program year, he stated: “The goals are somewhat similar from year to year, although some are unique to a particular group or student. In terms of how serious a group will get, the culture that will evolve, that is unknowable” (program director, 9/14/04). This parallels the perceptions of many students that many feel the group chose to enroll for the same reasons, and describes the process of community evolution that took place.

Many of the participants in the PAEP reported early in the year that they were disappointed with their educational experience to date (prior to entry into the PAEP) and that they were hoping to experience something more through the program. Some students were very eager to discuss their experiences with and perceptions of the staff at their district schools. Students discussed experiences regarding getting into trouble, the types of curriculum that were implemented, the types of teachers they had, and other reasons that they wanted to attend the PAEP.

Many expressed the feeling that they were not allowed to thrive: “I felt totally stifled. There was no chance to be creative or even to be a different learner, like, to
look at things differently” (Chris, 10/6/04). Another typical experience was that of trying to re-create identity. Many of the students indicated that they wanted a chance to evolve as people:

It was impossible to grow into anybody at [district school], because you go to the school with the same 100 students for like, 12 years, and all of the teachers know your name and your family and they already have decided who you are going to be, before you are even in high school. So, if you make a mistake, or deviate at all from the path they slotted for you, you’re doomed! (John, 2/28/05)

In discussion with a staff member about the different types of students that are selected, the staff member indicated that there are always a certain number of students who have:

gotten into serious situations, trouble, and there are always adults who never give those kids a second chance. For a lot of those kids, this is a chance. It may be the last time someone will try to show them, maybe the only time, to really get it that they are essentially good, and that their mistakes don’t have to be what define them as people. I hope they learn that at least here. That they define who they are, and they can do that: change it as much as they want. (staff, 10/25/04)

Students had a range of experiences in school prior to the PAEP, although the majority (85%) expressed dissatisfaction to some degree. One of the main factors of evaluation of pre-PAEP schooling seemed to be how much (or little) their classes interested them: “I became desensitized to the public school system and learning in general” (Marie, 11/25/04), “repetitive and unstimulating” (Chris, 11/25/04) “did mindless work that I never understood and that the teachers couldn’t seem to justify for real life either,” (John, 11/25/04), “no time for electives, for things I actually wanted to learn” (Marie, 11/25/04) Another salient point seemed to be that participants wanted to be challenged: “I was frustrated at being taught below my skill level. I had to learn by reading and finding things out on my own” (Chris, 11/22/04),
“It was too easy to figure out the minimum requirements to pass, just that I even say that is sad. There shouldn’t have been a minimum” (John, 11/22/06).

Students also indicated that they spent a great deal of their time “beating the system.” One participant stated:

It was like a game I’d play if the class was not relevant to me- which was most of them. I’d figure out how to play the teacher and the course, whether it was Cliff’s Notes, papers bought online, sucking up, whatever. And the scary thing is, they must have known, at least some of them, but I just slid on through. (Chris, 11/25/06)

Another participant indicated that he figured out early on in high school, “that I could pass without doing any homework, ever. If I did well on quizzes and tests, and if I participated once in a while, how can a teacher fail you? It’s kind of sick” (Chris, 10/6/04). There was a range of attitudes about whether or not school was valuable for learning which included a sense, for some students, that there was important non-academic learning that occurred during pre-PAEP school experiences. “It was more socially educational than academically, but I did learn” (Marie, 9/9/04) “Never minded school much, never had to do much to get by- the hard stuff to learn was mostly about how to deal with people” (Marie, 10/6/04) “Took normal classes (including AP English), participated in extracurriculars where I really learned: student council, human rights club, chamber choir”(Marie, 11/25/04).

Students also had a distinct sense that something was missing from pre-PAEP experiences. In regard to the relationship between teachers and students, most students in the program felt that their pre-PAEP student-teacher experiences were less than ideal. Some of the students expressed intensely negative feelings with regards to their prior experiences with teachers: “Teachers totally disrespect the students. They
are condescending and dismiss thoughts and ideas, then they get upset when no one in
the class wants to talk” (Chris, 9/8/04), “I can’t recall a class where I felt the teacher
had an enthusiasm for kids or for their work. It was all about the paycheck” (Chris,
10/6/04), “Teachers couldn’t care less about us or even about what they taught”
(John, 11/25/04). Such comments indicate a sense that students felt disconnected
from teachers, and thus learning, in part because they believed the teachers were not
invested in the teaching or the students. The students had an acute awareness of
student-teacher relationships. The association between connection (or lack thereof)
and motivation became a focal point of the study. The development of close staff-
student connections and the impact on students’ perceptions and motivations will be
more closely examined in the next chapter.

From the survey, responded to by 32 out of the total school population of 54,
there were three distinctly positive expressions of student-teacher relationships prior
to the PAEP experience: “Good student-teacher relationships,” “The few teachers
who cared (about us and about what they taught) helped me hang on for all of the
other classes,” “I had one teacher who just loved her job. She’d tell us, ‘I can’t
believe they pay me for this!’ And it always made me happy to be there. Even though
I hated the course itself, I was willing to work for her because she connected with us
and with what she taught” (11/25/04). This last comment is telling in that it implies
that the relationship is what motivated the student, not the actual coursework.

Other responses were more neutral in discussing student/teacher connection:

I don’t think it was the teachers’ fault. They have all of the tests to prep us
for, but there was just no human connection. Any time we’d start to get into
something, the teacher would have to stop us, and say, “This is a great
discussion, but we can’t go into it because the test is in 4 months” or
whatever. So it isn’t their fault, but there is a lack of connection. (Chris, 11/24/04)

Most participants indicated that going to school was, in some way, a negative experience. Even when students appeared to be explaining what they “liked” about school, there was generally an indication as well of something that they equally disliked: “I liked the people (friends and teachers), I liked to learn, but I did not like trivial schoolwork. My concern was learning, not getting good grades” (Chris, 11/25/04). Many participants indicated that they enjoyed school primarily for the social aspects of seeing friends and participating in extracurricular activities. Survey participants included comments about teachers being “unresponsive to student needs,” classes being “irrelevant to anything in real life” and consisting of “monotonous work” (11/25/04). In discussing pre-PAEP schooling, students indicated a sense of being bored, as well as feeling a lack of connection to the school community: “completely anonymous,” “no connection,” “without any community whatsoever—anonymous souls floating from room to room.”

Emerging Themes

The findings from the early part of the year indicated two major themes. The first theme relates to connections and community, and how these impact on learning. Many of the students indicated they felt a sense of connection and/or community had been missing from their earlier educational experiences. The ways in which the community was established have been discussed in this chapter. In Chapters V through VII, ways that students perceived the evolving community will be explored.

The other theme identified student understandings of the purpose of schooling and thus their perceptions of their role in learning. Through the year, students
struggled to understand, and at times to reconcile, the differences between their experiences with education in their district schools and the experiences that they had at the PAEP. This in turn impacted on their understanding of what the purpose of school and learning is in relation to participation in larger society.

These themes will be explored in Chapters V through VII through the description of the experiences of three composite students. While the patterns are defined separately for each student, it is important to note that they overlap: the boundaries are blurred, as is the boundary between social and academic learning. Furthermore, a year-long study produces such a vast amount of data, that no body of work could fully articulate all of the patterns and themes evidenced. The themes discussed in this work represent the major issues in the complicated happenings that were in evidence at the PAEP during the study year. This research attempts to focus in on the major themes that relate to the learning and doing that was observed, with the hopes of understanding, from student perspectives, how to create educational programs that educate as well as engage students.

Student Exemplars: Composites

The next three chapters examine the participants’ experiences in the PAEP. In order to best articulate the social and academic learning of the participants, three composite students were generated, and students were assigned to the composites based on three measures. Each composite is made up of “like-minded” and “like-driven” students: students who seemed to think and act in similar ways, based on their words and actions. The participants who make up the composites were categorized by three measures (outlined in Table 4): motivations for entering the PAEP,
perceptions about schooling, and the level of participation in the separate challenge areas of the PAEP. The designation of similar mindsets and drive took into consideration the answers students provided on the survey, informal conversation with students (regarding pre-PAEP experiences, reasons for applying for and entering the PAEP, hopes and goals for the PAEP experience and beyond, and attitudes and beliefs about education), and observable actions the students took during the study year. The first composite, Marie, represented about one quarter of the students. The second composite, John, represented the majority of the PAEP students. The final composite, Chris, represented a small (about 10%) but important section of the student body.

Table 4 Outline of Qualities Used for Creating Composites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Marie</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Chris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation for Entering Program</td>
<td>More challenge, enrichment</td>
<td>Get an “edge” for college</td>
<td>Find purpose in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of School Prior to PAEP</td>
<td>Generally positive though unfulfilling</td>
<td>Somewhat academically and socially negative,</td>
<td>Waste of time, boring, taught below level of ability,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dissatisfied with curriculum/staff,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Participation in Challenge Areas</td>
<td>Active, Curious, Generally eager to take risks</td>
<td>Mixed active/passive, Willing to take moderate risks (daring grew through year)</td>
<td>Guarded, Distant, Took few risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students in Composite</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Establishment and Role of Community

Marie, John, and Chris participated in the academic, social, and experiential components of the PAEP experience together, however their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors varied. This section will first explore the development of community and connections (a major component of the PAEP's philosophical framework) in the orientation period of the PAEP. A discussion of the early activities is relevant because it set the philosophical groundwork that staff and students referred to throughout the year, thus it is an appropriate lens with which to view the PAEP experience. After a brief examination of this setup will be an exploration of the ways the different composites acted, reacted, and interacted with regards to the developing concept of community and connectivity.

The basis of the PAEP program, according to one of its founders (the current director) when addressing the students, is “to provide a link between adolescence and adulthood, to give you a sense of purpose in the learning you experience, and to help you understand what it is you want to do, in the hopes that if you do what you want, you will lead happier, more productive lives” (9/14/04). From the outset, there is a connection between being a young person and an adult, as well as connection between being an individual and the widening circles of social connection that each individual has, as defined in Figure 5. The early challenge areas of the program are designed to help participants establish and articulate their own identity (for themselves and for each other) as well as that of the group. As one staff member described it, “It’s by knowing who we are as individuals that we can best understand who we can be as a group. Then, knowing that, we’ll try to figure out
Figure 5. Ideal Perspective of Connections and Community Relationships in PAEP
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Researcher's Perception of Impact on Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Forced Choice”: students choose between 2 options, then share their choice and reasons with peers (ex: Are you a symphony or a rock concert?)</td>
<td>Socialization, helps students to define themselves for others and to learn the identities of peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Interview”: students sat with someone they did not know and interviewed them. Student then introduced new peer to the group.</td>
<td>Socialization, self-definition, learning about peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of rules and regulation: detailed review with explanation of reasons for each specific item</td>
<td>Establishes guidelines for year, identifies purpose/reasons for rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Philosophy &amp; Goals of the Program”: program director reviews “what makes the program work” (9/9/04). Directs students in creating a list of the goals they have for the program.</td>
<td>Builds community (common goals), clarifies for students why they chose the program, establishes groundwork for personal goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“5 Key Assumptions”: discussion of the 5 assumptions of the program (1. you can do more than you think, 2. no one has more power in your life than you, 3. disappointment= opportunity to learn, 4. attitude is critical, 5. it is up to you).</td>
<td>Defines program philosophy, empowers students to take control of their PAEP experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Name Game”: students select an self-defining adjective with same first sound as their name (ex: loveable Lizzie), must recall the other students names.</td>
<td>Socialization, self-definition, community building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Town Meetings”: students introduced to town meetings as method of working together towards goals.</td>
<td>Internalization of the PAEP process, community building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning of group lunch: practice of town meeting format.</td>
<td>Internalization of the PAEP process, community building, socialization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of Student Goals for the Year (individual goals): staff directs students in the process by explaining that they need a focus for the year, or there will be no way to know if they are successful- Program director instructs: “Goals are what direct your course” &amp; “Don’t sell yourself short” (9/9/04).</td>
<td>Personal identity exploration, learning of common/uncommon ground.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 *Daily, Ongoing PAEP Activities Designed to Establish/Facilitate Community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Researcher’s Perception of Impact on Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Meeting - daily start of day.</td>
<td>Common starting point of each day, clarity of daily process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“New &amp; Goods” – during the business meeting, students invited to share one new thing or good thing that they experienced since the last business meeting.</td>
<td>Begins each school day with a positive focus; keeps students and staff connected on a personal level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Breaks” – time in between activities when students are permitted to move freely about the campus (lounge, classrooms, outside, hallways, offices).</td>
<td>Students have the opportunity to get to know each other and the staff socially, and to find common ground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA (Pre-lunch attendance) - whole program comes together for attendance before being released for lunch – necessary announcements made.</td>
<td>Reconnection as whole group after separate morning activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/5 Minute Meeting - whole program comes together, attendance taken, review of afternoon schedule, necessary announcements made.</td>
<td>Reconnection as whole group after lunch in preparation or afternoon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleanup &amp; Closure - whole program comes together, attendance, announcements and reminders made.</td>
<td>Reconnection as whole group at close of school day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

how that fits into our world” (10/6/04).

During first two challenge areas (see Table 2) students had opportunities to interact on a variety of levels. Tables 5 and 6 identify activities that are designed to contribute to the establishment of community. Table 5 provides a list of daily activities that help to shape and build the community and Table 6 provides a list of initial activities that occurred during the orientation that were designed to contribute to the establishment of the community. The structured and that were introduced during the orientation period and occurred daily throughout the program.
There were many activities during the orientation that were designed to establish a connection between the participants and the program experience. Table 5 articulates some of the activities the students participated in during orientation, and attempts to examine the impact of these activities on the establishment of community and connections. As with Table 6, a more in depth discussion of how different composites reacted to these activities will be explored in the following chapters.

The structure and purpose of the daily activities described in Table 6 were clearly articulated for the participants over the course of the first week. They were introduced gradually over the course of the week; each day brought a new experience until the formula for the daily structure was established.
CHAPTER V

MARIE

The first composite, Marie, is based on students whose pre-PAEP experiences were characterized as generally positive, although unfulfilling. These students came to the program with the anticipation that they would be, “getting more bang for my buck out of school, or my dad’s bucks anyway” (9/14/04) in terms of enrichment experiences, internships, and applied, meaningful academics. Generally speaking, these students did not hold animosity towards their former teachers or schools, although there was a sense that there was, “something inherently wrong in a system where the teacher says that a conversation is great, but has to stop because it isn’t preparing us for the regents, or AP exam, or whatever new test Bush plans for us” (9/9/04). When there were negative comments about individuals from their prior experiences, students often qualified that these were individual incidents.

Overall, students who made up the Marie composite took an active role in their participation in the PAEP. Many of them expressed that pre-PAEP school at times, “felt like it was being done to us” (11/08/04). By enrolling in the PAEP they hoped to take a proactive measure; “hopefully be able to make choices and have experiences that I fell will help prepare me for the future” (9/10/04). The students making up the Marie composite also enrolled in the PAEP to find engagement and
interaction, like-minded people (adults and peers), to “have a kicking [exciting, productive] senior year” (9/14/04), to “make friends with all kinds of people” (9/9/04), “to learn about the world, the real world, not just the stuff everyone has been scaring us about all through high school, and to figure out how to be grown up” (9/14/04), and “to learn all the things I’ll need to now that there is never any time to teach in regular school” (9/16/04).

Connections and Community

From the outset of the school year, Marie seemed to place a great deal of importance on establishing and being a part of the community. As described in Chapter IV, one of her major reasons for enrolling in the program was a desire to connect more personally with her educational experience (teachers, peers, learning). During the early weeks of the year, as each new component of the daily structure of the program was introduced, she made a note of it in her daily planner. At one point, a peer asked her why she was writing down the things that were going to be part of the daily routine (and so presumably did not need to be written down). She replied, “It’s in case any kids join us later in the year. I’m writing down why we do things this way so they can understand” (9/9/04). To Marie, it was important for all community members to have an understanding of the way things worked there.

During the activities in described in Chapter IV, Table 5 and 6, Marie engaged in open dialogue with staff and peers in her attempts to understand the purpose and meet the goals of each activity. During the interview and forced choice activity, she spent much of the time trying to understand and get to know the identity and perspectives of her partners, as typified in the exchange below:
Marie: That’s so funny, that you see yourself as a symphony... I would have thought you’d say a rock band. Why a symphony?
Peer: It’s way more complex. Rock is pretty much the same thing through the song and only a few instruments, but a symphony has all these different pieces working together to make one total sound. And they have different parts in the music. The same piece has, like happy, sad, frantic, all in the same piece, you know?
Marie: Yeah. I get it. That's such an interesting way to look at it. So what about you do you see as complex like, what are your different instruments, and, like, pieces of the song? (9/7/04)
Marie continued to probe deeper for connections and answers that could help her understand her peers and the community that she was becoming a part of. During a group lunch that was planned by the students, Marie spoke with me (9/14/04) about the rapidity with which she saw the group coming together and what she thought might have influenced this. She commented on how she felt the activities in the previous week had a strong influence, and how the types of students in the program might also be predisposed to participating in this community:

I already feel like we’ve known each other much longer than a week. The way last week went, it was like everything we did brought us a little closer. We laughed a lot but we also really got to know each other much more intimately than we could have without the games. I think that is one of the things that was missing at (district school) for me. There wasn’t this connection. Maybe part of it is that we are all here and we know that at least we all wanted to be here. I know we have different reasons, but just wanting to be here, for whatever reason, sort of ties us together, right? (9/14/04)

Later in the year we discussed the group lunch again, and she talked about how the time the students spent with each other really made an impression on her.

There were a few students with guitars and one with a banjo, and about half of the class sat around in the lounge watching, listening, and singing. Marie discussed what she saw happening:

It wasn’t really a sing along, but it sort of ended up being our “come along.” It was the point, I think, when we really became a group. I
remember looking outside the lounge and seeing you and [staff] looking in and smiling at us, and I think that was really the first time I saw us an “us.” We had just met each other, and yet here we were, singing and laughing, and totally exposing ourselves. That, as much as hiking in the mountains where you really had to rely on each other, defined us. When I was singing that corny song “I saw the light,” admitting I knew the tune and the words along with the others. I just felt so connected. (12/13/04)

Marie perceived the program year as a cohort: a group of individuals sharing a common experience and working towards loose common goals. She spent the early months of the program examining how she fit into the group and how the group fit into the series of groups participating in the PAEP over the years. After the group goal setting activity described in Chapter IV, Marie and two other students were discussing how so many of the students seemed to have like-minded goals and ideas. She questioned if it was similar year to year, or if they were a unique group. Her peer hypothesized that many of the goals might be similar from year to year, and that some might be relevant to a particular year’s group (he gave the example of wanting to be safe in the year of 9/11 as a possible year specific group goal). As they finished their discussion, Marie commented: “Maybe that is why he [program director] posts our goals and leaves them up. There were 27 [PAEP name] before us, and hopefully there will be more after us, but this one is ours” (10/6/04).

When students struggled throughout the year with particular challenge areas or class assignments, Marie often would offer her help and support. She was a person others would turn to for help. During a NAS class, she discussed this role and how it helped her to better understand what her role in her family, community, and the larger society should be. She indicated that in the PAEP, she was experiencing “how much richer life is when I listen to and share the experience of others” (11/23/04).
The language arts class was another environment where Marie's commitment to the idea of community membership was apparent. One of the main components of the language arts class was for students to write weekly pieces based on literary themes discussed in class. Ideally, students then shared with the group and received feedback regarding their piece. Through the first academic block, Marie worked diligently on her pieces, and welcomed feedback from the staff members. When her peers would read their own work, Marie offered support and encouragement, and often gave constructive feedback that was well received by her peers. It was typical to hear her discussing pieces in small groups with other students, both in class and during free time. What Marie did not do, however, was share her own work regularly. Midway through the academic year, she and another student were discussing what they had done and learned during the first applied academics block. Marie said she felt she had a deeper understanding of writing from the experience of really discussing the pieces. She indicated that she felt her own writing had greatly improved because she was able to hear and deconstruct the work of her peers. She then stated: "It's really a shame that I haven't been able to share my own work. It isn't fair, really, that I can allow others in the group to expose themselves, and I get to grow from it, but I'm unwilling, well, no, unable yet, to do it" (1/24/05). Marie struggled with the idea of taking from the community without reciprocating. While her peers assured her that in giving constructive feedback, she was in fact contributing, Marie seemed unconvinced.

During the preparation for the celebrations, at the end of the year, Marie reflected on being a full member of the community and how the language arts
experience was symbolic for her. She discussed how in the creative writing class, during the second academic block, she finally shared a piece of her own aloud. She described it as “tapping into her soul” (6/1/05), and then exposing that deep part of herself. She reflected that this was a point when she felt most a part of the community, where she was able to give herself “fully over to the group: open and unafraid” (6/1/05). She stated that the experience opened her up in a way that prepared her to “receive all the world had to offer” (6/1/05).

Marie seemed to feel early on that the community was responsible to help hold the individuals up. She readily admitted that the first wilderness experience was a challenge for her. Upon the return to school, she discussed the experience with me (10/6/04), indicating that she had a negative attitude going into it. She went on to say that when she was “out there,” she couldn’t help but notice her surrounds and the details of the experience. She discussed how people did things for her, “simple acts of kindness,” that made her feel connected to her group and made her realize that she would get through the experience with the help of the group. The experience was so powerful she used it as the backdrop for her celebration talk at the end of the year.

Marie saw the community as crucial to the things she achieved during the year. As the community service projects were being planned, she freely and openly discussed ideas with her classmates for their projects, but she did not move forward with her own. “I remember crying in the lounge, and it was crazy; I was so scared” (6/1/05). When she continued to discuss this, she explained that the community was what helped move her forward. During the planning stages of community service projects and internships, Marie was often overheard talking with students about how
they were going about making their choices and where they were in the process. In a group discussion about this early in the planning of internships, she indicated that she felt this was integral to everyone’s experience:

We have to know what others are doing. We are all doing it together, but for the first time. It makes sense that we are going to have different ideas and different connections. If we talk to each other, then we all can benefit from each other’s resources. That’s how [peer 1] got the first numbers he called. [Staff member] was talking with [peer 2] and I last week, just about different types of people we knew. Then when [peer 1] said they were interested in some abstract field, I knew to direct her to [peer 2] who had a connection. It’s nuts, because who would ever even consider an internship in that? And they are off today doing a site visit there! (12/6/04)

While she herself struggled at times to find her place in terms of situating herself in a community service project or internship, she was dedicated to the community, in part because she “knew that was how I was going to get through it by their help” (3/7/05).

Marie viewed the connection between staff and students as vital in her experience and understanding of the success of the program. From the beginning of the year, Marie openly engaged in conversation about a variety of topics with the staff. She often pursued conversations outside of classes that tied into or built upon the classroom discussions, although her dialogue with staff was not limited to school conversations. She was inquisitive and often would comment to her peers about the difference in communicating with the staff of the PAEP and those from her district school. Marie often sought out staff members for formal and informal conversation on topics both academic and social. During her celebration talk she discussed the importance of student/teacher relationships, “At [PAEP], student-teacher relationships are huge. It is one of the reasons the program works: there is a
relationship and joint membership in the community” (6/6/05). She went on to explain how staff members made time to talk with students, not only when there was crisis, but even when the students just wanted to have conversations about things they were learning about. She talked about how the time spent talking with staff never felt rushed; that staff did not watch the clock or “try to hurry you to your point. It’s like they are genuinely interested They are a part of the conversation” (6/6/05).

Marie described the relationship between staff and students once, after she missed part of a science class and I asked her where she had been. She had been in conversation with a staff member about a book that she had been reading and struggling to grasp:

There is an agenda here, things to get done, but the fact that I or anyone might need to talk about an event or a big idea doesn’t get slighted, it gets addressed. I missed some of class, but he recognized that the thoughts I was having wanted to be discussed. Even though I had to be in class and he had to be doing his work, he made the time. I learned so much in that conversation, not from him, but with him. It wasn’t me asking him questions, we talked about the ideas. So, I wasn’t really missing out on learning, I was just doing it different. (3/29/05)

Perceptions of School and the Role of Learners

The very reasons Marie gave for entering the PAEP help to underscore her perceptions of schooling. Marie wanted to get more out of her school experience than she had at her district school, and she was trying to “see the connection between this [school] and real life; you know after college” (9/8/04). Marie expressed that pre-PAEP school at times, “felt like it was being done to us” (11/08/04). By enrolling in the PAEP she hoped to take a proactive measure to “hopefully be able to make choices and have experiences that I feel will help prepare me for the future” (9/10/04). Marie viewed school as a necessary and essential component of growing
up, but struggled to see (from her pre-PAEP experiences) the connection between school and becoming an adult.

I get that school helps prepare us, and I think most teenagers, even though they like, rebel, understand that the system is there for a reason. But, you know, if you asked me how, I couldn’t tell you at all. I never learned how to balance a checkbook, or even open an account. I didn’t learn about working in the field I am interested in. I learned about authors, and books, and math, and history, and all of that is cool, it’s fine, but I don’t exactly know how it relates to being grown up. It does, but I can’t say how. (12/21/04)

She indicated too that she felt while certain things about school clearly were connected to becoming an adult other things were more abstractly related:

It’s like, studying global history makes it much easier to really understand what is going on now. So some of what we learned is directly connected to being, like, grown up. But other stuff matters too. If I want to get along with all sorts of people, like in the work place, there needs to be something we can talk about other than work. The things we do in school, at least for a lot of people, might be that common ground. You know, talking about a book you read in high school, or even being able to read a book now. It is hard to explain, but it all kind of connects. (11/24/04)

Marie came into the program with the idea that school was something that happened separate from real life. She wanted to understand the relationship between what was done in school and what she considered real life, which she indicated was what would come after she graduated from college. This idea of real life began to change over the course of the year, and the change in perception impacted greatly on her understanding of the purpose of school. She eventually came to believe that real life, as she put it, was actually occurring at the moment, and that she could use school to help her life thrive.

The environmental science course during the first section of applied academics is a good example of how and why Marie began to revise her understanding of the connections between school and real life. The course started
with a description of “how the universe evolved” and then led into the exploration of
the different areas of environmental science, with a focus on environmentalism,
ecology, and “green politics.” Marie explained that through lectures and discussions,
she began to see that she “could and should take steps in her life to help re-green the
planet” (12/8/04). She learned about several environmental groups and became an
active member of one. The lessons learned in the classroom were the impetus for her
actions. Then, her involvement helped her gain greater knowledge of the subject.
She commented on this during the preparation for her internship: “[Program
director’s science] class is really what got me into this. When I learned about how we
were destroying the planet it made me want to learn more about what I could do. I
got involved. And now here I am, getting ready to go work in the field for my
internship. It all came out of the class” (1/19/05). This indicates the evolving
understanding Marie had about the purpose of school: in this instance, one purpose is
to gain knowledge that could then be acted on.

During the internship, Marie and I discussed how her understanding about
school was changing:

The things we learn here are really shaping how I see things. It’s like, it’s
all connected- what we do in here and what we do out of here. We created a
resume as an assignment, but then it will get used to get an internship. In
NAS we learned about how Native Americans communicated over land and
time, and that understanding has helped me in my internship to see why I
need to understand the prior occurrences and regulations. It’s the history of
what makes them [internship site] what they are and able to do what they
do” (2/7/05).

The second applied academics block influenced Marie’s understanding of the
purpose of school even more. During this session, Marie began to “see connections
between what goes on at school and the things that go on outside of school, and inside
of my head” (5/17/05). For instance, in the philosophy elective, Marie had the chance to read and discuss texts with a staff member. She reflected on this experience and explained that the books and discussions helped her to gain a better understanding of the reasoning behind the ways people acted and behaved in the world: “It makes perfect sense to study philosophy in school. It helps you to figure out why things are the way they are” (5/25/05). The classes she participated in furthered her perception that real life was actually happening now, not something that would occur in the future. She spoke often about how the things she learned in school could help her to function better and participate in life more fully.

These perceptions Marie had regarding the purpose of school were connected to her idea of her role as a learner. As Marie began to see herself as “actually living real life now” (1/19/05) she took an even more active role in trying to pursue academic areas that related to her interests or that could help her to achieve her goals. For example, during the health class the students were taught various aspects of time management, including how to prioritize. Marie began to use the skills she learned for prioritizing her tasks to help her work on issues in her family life. She shared with me that she and her mother had a very strained relationship at the time, and that she wrote out all of the issues that were between them. She then went through her list with her mother and together they made a priority list of which issues were causing the most strain, and worked towards resolving the larger issues.

Marie came to see herself as being in charge of and responsible for the amount and type of educational experience she was going to have. While she did at times experience situations where she did not know how to take action or what action to
take in order to move forward, at such times, she would seek counsel of her peers or
the staff, thus taking some action. She explained her understanding of her role as a
learner as follows:

I can’t just sit here and wait for (staff members) to come and tell me what I
need to do. There are too many of us first of all, and second of all, how can
they know what I need, really? I mean, it is the point of learning, right, to
become, like, independent, and in control, and productive. So, I need to
know what I want and what I need. I need to figure out what productive
means for me. I don’t think I can get there, get it all done, myself. That is
what the staff is for, to help me figure out the plan. But I have to have the
goal, the vision, the idea. And then I have to be able to communicate this to
them. And when I don’t know what I am doing, like when I am on a dead
end, whether it is because I got lost on the path, or because someone is
expecting stuff of me that isn’t helping me get where I think I need to go,
it’s my responsibility to go and get the help. It’s on me. (Marie, 11/18/04).

Marie came to view the purpose of school as a means by which a person grew,
and she saw part of her role in this growth was to push through situations that made
her uncomfortable. In preparation for her end of year presentation, she discussed
with me how she saw the PAEP facilitating her in her desire to push through her
comfort zone:

There was time to get into a new zone, experience learning how to be and
who I was in that zone and time to master the domain, get good, get a
little comfortable, but as soon as that set in, the next challenge came. And
each area, eventually for all of us I think, became more faceable, even
though they were progressively harder. As soon as I started to get
comfortable in the program, it was time to enter a new zone. (6/2/05)

The internship is a strong example of how Marie saw school as a means to
help push her beyond her self-imposed limits. Marie was nervous about getting an
internship. She began with a few other girls to consider going to the Midwest to work
on a Native American Reservation. In order to do such an internship, students have
to put in extra planning time and submit additional paperwork, so it seems that this
would be more work, and thus more of a push through the comfort zone. However working hard was not the area of discomfort. Marie later told me that, in fact, her original plan (to work on the reservation) was the opposite of going out of her comfort zone, because in this case, she would be planning and executing the internship with two of her peers. She would not be doing it alone, and this, she said, was a very comfortable situation for her. When she was asked, and thought about, why she wanted to go work on the reservation, she found that there was not a clear answer, except that she was less intimidated because she was working with a group. At this point, she decided to try and find another internship. She ended up in an unsatisfying internship. Again, she planned to “stick it out, because that was easier than trying to find another one” (3/16/05). She indicated that a staff member helped her see things differently: “Why stay there if I knew it wasn’t what I wanted to be doing. That was the push, that question. And I had no good answer” (6/2/05). She again pushed through her comfort zone and finally found an internship that truly satisfied her.

During her celebration talk she discussed how learning to push through her fears to pursue what she wanted was the most powerful lesson she learned during the program year, and that the coursework in the PAEP (the challenge areas) provided her with the tools and the understanding of how to do this. She discussed how the program year was set up to constantly build on the previous component, making the challenges and rewards greater and greater. What she was referring to was the scaffolding that the program has built into its design: each challenge area is designed to foster the skills and confidence needed to succeed in the next challenge area. In
the orientation, when students were excited, scared, nervous, and anxious they were eased into a program and each other through the community building activities in orientation. As the community became established, the students then had to go out into the woods for a week and help each other survive. When they returned, and the community was tightly knit together, they are put into a new situation, the zone switches to community service. Throughout the year, this cycle continued, and Marie reflected on the process during preparation for her celebration talk,

We had to reach deep inside, figure out what we wanted. We had each other for emotional support, and the classes and staff taught us to do the leg work, like mastering the phone and interview, and learning how to ask for the things we wanted, but then we had to go out and do it. I think that is really what the point of school is, to help you to figure out what you want. You know, give you information about and experience with the world. But it is your job to take a course of action. (6/2/05)
CHAPTER VI

JOHN

The second composite, John, is made up of a larger and more diverse group. This group represents a wider range of reasons for entering the PAEP, and the satisfaction levels with pre-PAEP school experiences reflect that range. Many of the students displayed resentment about the educational system they participated in prior to the PAEP on the levels of individual classes, schools, districts, and the American educational system as a whole. Students in this group generally expressed resentment and dissatisfaction about their pre-PAEP school experiences, but provided differing perspectives with regards to where and/or on whom these negative feelings should be placed. For some of the students, this resentment was relatively abstract and benign, while for others it was pointed and sharp, either directed towards individuals, specific programs, or the larger school system. Participants related general and specific experiences that helped develop their perspectives. The more benign dissatisfaction was often identified by participants expressing a sense of boredom in pre-PAEP schooling. In terms of individual classes and teachers, one participant indicated,

The teachers might have tried to make it more interesting, but maybe they really couldn’t. How interesting can you make a Math 3 when you have 40 minutes a day, and half of the kids in class really don’t give a damn? It’s impossible. Not to mention, they have so much to teach in a year to get us ready for the test. I bet they are as bored as we are. (10/7/04)
Some participants expressed a more aggressive dissatisfaction with their individual teachers and programs pre-PAEP.

It felt like, no matter what I did, the school wanted to keep me from succeeding. It was individuals, but it was also sort of the school, because the school kept those individuals, you know? Like, I had a teacher in 10th grade tell me that I shouldn’t volunteer to read in class because I wasn’t a good enough reader. I have dyslexia, and so I read a little slow, but my resource teacher told me to volunteer, because it would help with what she called my fluency. I was in class with all of my friends, so I wasn’t embarrassed. Not until he said that. When I told my guidance counselor, he just said, “Well he is the teacher and it is his classroom.” So until this year, I never read in a class again; not from the books, and not my own work. I hated that place. (12/13/04)

The range of reasons for entering the PAEP were also varied. Many students expressed the hope that the experience (be it alternative education in general, or specific components of the program, such as the internship, or the wilderness experiences) would, “give me an edge in the competition to get into college” (12/20/04). Others indicated that they needed a change in environment, “I just couldn’t go back and face those people, the kids, the teachers, another year. I would have dropped out, or failed out” (9/14/04), “I did everything there was to be done there. I was done with what they had to offer” (10/25/04). Still others were more ambivalent about being in the program. Sometimes the ambivalence stemmed from a positive pre-PAEP school experience: “I wasn’t sure I wanted to spend my senior year away from my friends” (2/7/05), “There are courses I wanted to take all through high school, that I could only take this year, but I can’t if I am here” (9/10/04), “My school is actually cool; I like the teachers and miss my friends. I go back every day for track or band, or just to hang out” (11/28/04). Other reasons for ambivalence seemed to stem from a wariness about the PAEP, “I hope that this will be better than
[district school]" (9/14/04), “I wondered sometimes this summer if maybe it wasn’t all smoke and mirrors. I mean, how much am I really going to learn and do here?” (9/10/04).

Connections and Community

Throughout the program year, John had mixed ideas about the concept of community and the role community played in the PAEP experience. While John was generally dissatisfied with the community experience in his district school, he did not immediately allow himself to be a full member of the PAEP community. John expressed that he was glad to be in the program, “This is the best thing that could happen to me. I definitely would have dropped out if I didn’t get in” (9/10/04). He understood, from talking with participants in the PAEP from previous years, that a deep sense of commitment to the community would evolve. “My neighbor went here 5 years ago, and he is still best friends, through college and marriage, with like, his whole class. They still get together and everything, and some of them live in other countries!” (10/6/04). However, unlike Marie, who was eager to embrace and partake in the evolving community, John tested the boundaries and limits of tolerance regarding the staff’s commitment to the program philosophy and to the students.

During the first weeks of the year (orientation), John showed a tendency to test limits. As discussed in Chapter IV, in the beginning of the program, John tested time boundaries with the staff. He was late the first day, and subsequently late for a few of the classes and group activities in the first weeks of the program. He also did not always come to the classes and activities prepared (with requested materials or
having done requested planning). As the first quarter ended, John had this to say about the orientation period and his testing of boundaries:

I think I wanted to see what I was going to get away with. I mean, at [district school] it is one of the things that got me into so much trouble, but it is part of who I am. I have my own clock and my own ways of getting things done. I think the fact that nobody made a big deal of it here, and they seemed to really want me in the class, not for their power, but for me, I don’t know, it’s just a totally different approach. All of a sudden, I didn’t want to be late or unprepared, because there was as much stuff going on in class as there was outside, or maybe it was that everyone here wanted to be in? (11/22/04)

Two of John’s stronger motivations for joining the PAEP were to get away from his district school and to make new friends. Both of these motivations pertain to the theme of connectivity and community. In terms of making new friends, John spent time early on getting to know his peers, socializing beyond the allotted break periods, and during orientation classes. While John was friendly with his peers and staff, he originally sought out people that he felt he was “most like,” whereas Marie was eager to interact with everyone in the program, particularly people she thought were different from her in their views and their ways. There was a transformation, however, in John’s idea about his connection to the community over the course of the school year.

During the preparation for the first wilderness experience, John discussed with a staff member and fellow student the idea of being away with his “new friends.” He questioned the motives and wisdom of the staff setting the groups, as opposed to students being able to self-select them:

It’s going to be weird, to, you know, be out there all week with each other. I understand why we can’t pick our groups, and I like everyone here, but there are some people, you know, that you connect with more. I’d think you’d [staff] want us to build up those friendships, and you know, it’s easier to
work together. Don’t get me wrong, it’s going to be a blast, and I like everyone so far, but we have to eat, and sleep, and everything with each other. (9/22/04)

This desire to be with like-minded peers permeated his early experiences in the PAEP. During any group work in the early part of the program, John tended to work either with students he felt he shared common attitudes with, or with people he knew from his district school and other social circles. He discussed his early ideas about broadening his social circles, “I have always hung out with other slackers, procrastinators, whatever you’d call us. That way, I won’t look so lame!” (11/29/04), “It’s just the way things are. People tend to stick with people like them. Jocks hang out with jocks and deadheads with deadheads for the most part, because they have the same interests, right?” (10/6/04).

As the year progressed however, John seemed to branch out in his ideas about who he was, and thus how he related to the other students in the community. While the exploration of “who he was” will be conducted in the following section on the purpose of school and role of the learner, it is important to mention here because it relates to the ways John connected with the PAEP community. During a focus group, John, Marie, and Chris discussed the ways they initially connected to the program. Marie indicated that she was eager to meet people who thought and acted differently from her because one of her motives for joining the PAEP was to broaden her understanding of the world. John indicated however, that at first he was more interested in making friends, which to him meant people that he could do things with:

I wanted to hang out and do all the things I’d always done, party, goof off, hang out. So I was looking for new friends, not new mindsets, like you [Marie]. But then, I started to like all these freaks [laughter] and I started to go and do freaky things. Like when I went to the poetry reading with
[names a group of students]. My mom totally didn't believe that was where we were going. I didn't even believe it! (5/18/05)

John's prior experiences from his district school also influenced his early behaviors in the program with regards to establishment of the community. He was dissatisfied and disconnected in many ways at his district school, which may have made him distrust school. He did not connect to the PAEP staff and program philosophy as immediately as Marie did. The way the staff interacted with him was initially a source of puzzlement, “No matter what I do, they are cool about it. Late, no pen, talking in class, whatever. They [staff] just roll along, and include me. At [district school] they would ignore me or kick me out. So, what do they want? Does it mean it doesn’t matter what I do?” (10/18/04). As the year progressed, John found more connection with the staff and the program philosophy, and this, along with the connections he was making on a social level, seemed to cause him to become more invested in the community as a whole, and thus his involvement and his learning.

John discussed how the first wilderness experience impacted on his understanding of what it meant to be a part of the PAEP community. He discussed how the shared experienced changed the way he looked at the staff:

The boundaries were pretty much gone by the second night, all gone. I mean, [staff] carried our fuel, we had to carry each other’s food, and we knew if someone got hurt, we had to divvy up the gear. We were all seeing the same views, huffing [climbing] the same hills; all for one and one for all. (Staff member) stumbled just like we did sometimes. It gave me a different sense of roles. They [staff] weren’t b-s’ing us when they talked about us making the choice to have a great year; they aren’t forcing anything on us. Their job is to be guides, just like they were on the trip, not better, not more powerful. But we’ll make (PAEP) and we’ll make our year. (12/8/04)
The idea of community and connectivity further took hold for John during the academic sections. The curriculum has a spiral design, with many classes and assignments tying into various other components of the PAEP. Again, this will be explored in the section on the purpose of schooling and the role of the learner, but it is important to note because it articulates John’s evolving perspective on community and one’s behavior. The cultural studies class had a big impact on the perspective John took towards the community. A major focus of the class was developing an understanding of Native American Culture, and the students were guided towards seeking connections between this cultural philosophy and their own lives. John eagerly participated in the class activities, which included discussions, readings, demonstrations, structured lessons, and field trips. Like most of the students in the program, John felt he learned much in this class. He stated that, “[It] makes sense of things, of [PAEP] and why we do things the way we do, but also it just makes sense of things in life” (12/16/04). The class offered students plenty of opportunities to interact and to discuss their ideas and questions relating to a variety of topics. John indicated that this made him feel “a part of something so real” (11/28/04). During his individual wrap up (at the end of the year) John had this to say about what he took from the cultural studies class:

It was probably the thing that finally made me feel here, a part of here, of this. It was a class, but it was more. I got connected there. And I learned, you act good, you get treated good. It may not be all the time by everyone, but that’s a mostly true thing. And even more important, you act good, you feel good, you are good. We all learned that together here, and so we became a part of this (PAEP) together. And then, we helped each other grow, maybe further than we planned or were comfortable with, even. We worked together. We figured stuff out. And that is what being grown up is really about, I think. We came together here, and we grew up some together. (6/7/04)
Another example that typifies the changes in John's perceptions of the community and his role in it occurred during the community service and internship components of the program. During the community service projects, there were numerous opportunities for students to interact and network with each other in an effort to try to secure a community service or internship project. John often offered to assist his peers (role playing for phone calls, brainstorming ideas for projects that would fit interests, offering or searching for contact information) when they were stuck. During the community service project, he settled into his project quickly, which gave him extra time before the site work began. Not all students who were in this position worked actively to help others, but John did. He was often overheard discussing options with his peers. Discussing this experience he said, “It mattered to me, a lot more than I would have thought, that everyone got a project they were into, like I did” (11/22/04). John was becoming invested in the success of his peers, invested in the community.

During the internship, John struggled at first to secure a project in his area of interest. He told a staff member, “Normally, I’d just give up about now. But I am going to do this. Someone here has to have an “in” at a site. Someone is going to help me” (12/21/04). He had been an asset to the community in the community service component, often helping and pushing his peers to take risks and pursue their true interests. At this point, when he was struggling, he had confidence that the community would, in turn, aid him.

This reliance on the community typified his behavior when he became stuck academically as well. During preparation for the science projects (students

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researched their choice of topic relating to environmental science for a term and then had to teach a 45-minute class), John often met with staff members and peers for advice. At one point, he was overheard talking to a staff member and two peers, asking, “Can we have lunch together? I need to go over the stuff I have on my project. I can’t pull it together.” Later, I asked John about this incident:

I never would believe that I would give my lunch up to hang out and talk about a project that isn’t even due yet. But I really needed to get it done right, because I am one of the first presentations. I know everyone is expecting to see how to present, and I just want to have it right, for me and for them. (3/21/05)

In his celebration talk, John discussed the difference between who he was during the first wilderness experience and who he became by the time the second experience came around:

There was a big change in who I was and how I acted from the [wilderness experience 1] to the [wilderness experience 2]. In [wilderness experience 1] I pushed to the front. I wanted to get there, to be ahead, front of the line. I ignored so much, what was around me, who was around me, what was needed and given around me. I was “getting there.” In [wilderness experience 2], I hung at the back of the group, so the people in my group didn’t feel rushed, didn’t feel like they held me up. I encouraged the people who struggled, I was a part of the group, and I wanted to be. (6/7/05).

Perceptions of School and the Role of Learners

John vacillated in his opinion on the role he played in his own education. He came into the program with a perspective of receptivity (having the learning process done to/for him). There were points in the program where this receptive approach began to modify and change into more active one, where he began taking control of and charge over what he did and learned about. An example of an exchange that highlights the difference between receptive and active perceptions and participation can be seen in the dialogue below (10/18/04), from an applied academics class in
which the students had to visually represent components of who they were/who they wanted to be. The discussion took place out of class and the staff member involved in the discussion was not the evaluating teacher for the project. In this exchange, John has a receptive approach, and student 2 and the staff member attempt to provide a more active approach for student 1:

John: Well, what if you aren’t good at art? Will that mess up my grade?
Staff: It is about representing. There are a lot of ways to do that.
John: Yeah, but it has to be on paper. And I need [staff member] to give me a good grade because I am sending this quarter’s transcript to my first choice college.
Staff: I think if you work with her and talk out your ideas and concerns, you’ll be able to do exactly what you need to in order to do well.
Student 2: I don’t think you can get a bad grade on this. It’s about you. So really, it is just a matter of figuring out how you want to present something you already know more than anyone about.
John: Yeah, but if I don’t present me the way she wants, it’s going to mess up my GPA [grade point average] for [college].
Staff: I’m pretty sure [student 2] is right. Don’t get so hung up in the grade, it’s about learning about and exploring yourself.
Student 2: Maybe you can come up with some other ways to represent. Maybe she will let you write a song about it or something. Maybe make a video?
Staff: Great idea! You should go see if [staff member] is around, or set up an appointment with her to see what you can come up with.

Like all of the students in the PAEP, John came into the program with a set of expectations that evolved from his prior school experiences. For students like John (with prior experiences that were negative or that caused them to feel school learning was something done to them), there was often a point where they got “stuck” in a set of anticipated expectations and a receptive approach to learning. John had been in trouble early in his high school career, and felt that the rest of his high school experience, he was forced to “pay for a few stupid mistakes I made when I was a freshman. Nobody gave me a chance, so I just didn’t bother to try” (11/28/04).
When probed deeper, John indicated that he felt his previous teachers and administration had very low expectations of him,

They treated me like I was a joke. They would make comments about me not doing my work to other kids, and if I ever asked a question it was like they either made such a big deal of it that I was embarrassed and didn’t even pay attention to the answer, or they totally ignored me and said stuff like, “Does it really matter? Are you actually going to do the work?” Which just pissed me off and made me not want to do it, you know? 10/6/04.

Later in the year, during a focus group, John reflected on the impact that his prior experiences had on his early participation in the program:

I was excited to be here but didn’t know why I wanted to be here. I wanted to be away from school, I wanted to make friends, to party like a rock star in new and interesting places [laughs] but I think there was something in me that wanted something else, like [another student] talked about. I wanted a chance to really do something. But I was such a fuck up for so long, that it was like, the wanting to do something was subconscious, unreachable. I didn’t know I wanted to be here for any other reason except to get away from my school, and to party [laughter]. But seriously, I think I did want to do something. To, I don’t know, I can’t explain. I wanted to still be me, I always want to be me, but through this year, I found out I wanted to be more of me. Does that make sense? To actually do my life, not let it be done. 5/23/05

It took time for students like John to accept that in the PAEP they were expected to take responsibility for defining and carrying out their academic program. As John began to participate in the first few challenge areas, he began to see new roles for himself as a learner. After the first wilderness experience, he discussed an idea that he had about his attitude for the school year. He started by describing how on the trip, there was a mountain that they had to traverse, and how he was tired, thirsty and out of water, and wanting to go home. As he began the ascent, he said he thought to himself “the mountain isn’t going to hike itself.” He told me that he made himself laugh, but that the idea stuck with him for most of the trip, and was still on
his mind. When I asked him for more information about this, he indicated that he did not realize how much control he had over his perception of things before he thought about the mountain not hiking itself. He told me he knew he could not sit down, or turn back; he had to climb the mountain. While this was something he had no control over, he realized he could take some control over his perspective. He thought about how he chose to be in the program, how he actually liked to hike, and how good it would feel to get to the top. He began hiking and actually enjoyed it.

This awareness of how his perception influenced his experience was an early indicator of the change in John’s perceived role as a learner. It was a step towards John taking a more active role in his learning and school experience. As his perception began to change, he began to take responsibility for what he did in the program. “I began to get the idea that in [program name], I was going to have to learn to push through my comfort zone.” (12/18/04). During his preparation for celebration, we discussed the concept and language of “pushing through your comfort zone” which is a term often I heard throughout the program year. I asked him about the language and concept:

Well, it isn’t a phrase I used before I was here. It’s their words, but I think we all knew the concept. I mean, just applying to the program, even people like me who really wanted out of their school, were pushing out of the comfort zone. What does that mean? It means do the things that I don’t want to, because I’m lazy, unsure, even just a little scared (laughs). It isn’t just the act of getting through something that makes you uncomfortable for the sake of doing it. It’s about taking the risk, the chance. That’s big because, I think, that’s what the whole point is, if you don’t get out of the comfort zone, you don’t take a chance, and then you stay stuck, in the life you were dealt, or the one you made for yourself, like I did at [district school]. You don’t learn anything. See, once you really learn to get out of your comfort zone, once the way of that is in you; your head, your heart your spirit like [staff] would say [laughs], then you’re never stuck anywhere again. If you get out of your comfort zone to a place you don’t
like, you just change it again. You don’t have to be, do, stay. Isn’t that what you think the program, and learning, is about? (6/2/05)

John strongly identified with the idea of being empowered to make himself new. Midway through the second academic phase, he discussed how different he felt as he learned, and how returning to his district school was:

I learned I really am master of my own domain, my destiny [laughs] corny, I know. But I really changed. When I go back to my home school the administrators still want me to be that guy I was when I left. They can’t think of me another way. I’m not him anymore. I could still be a wise ass, and I want to be sometimes, with them, but I don’t have to go back to that—what was comfortable for so long. I changed because I see the benefit for me. It freaks them out, I think, that I could have changed so much, because it turns everything they think they know about us upside down. It doesn’t fit that someone like me can change like this. Sometimes, I can’t believe it myself. But yeah— I can take responsibility for my learning. I can do that. (4/4/05)

Taking responsibility and pushing through the comfort zone were the two ideas that epitomized the role John began to see for himself as a learner. John worked on his academic courses with an enthusiasm he heretofore had not experienced, “I can’t believe I actually, not like it, but am into the classes and the work” (2/7/05). In his preparation for celebration talk, he discussed how he was proud of the work that he did, and that each assignment he did well made him that much more ready to take on the next assignment. He shared that his enthusiasm started because a staff member acted like he had faith that John could do an assignment John himself did not think he could accomplish. From there, he began to feel less intimidated, and eventually, he “stopped avoiding doing my work, and I just went ahead and got it done” (6/2/05).

This sense of responsibility extended beyond his academics. During his internship, John worked in the field of mental health. As he was working there, I had the opportunity to talk with him several times, both at his site and back at the school.
He shared that there was an important change in his lifestyle that he needed to make “in order to keep my integrity while working at [site]”. He indicated that the staff at his site would have no idea about this behavior, and that the staff at the program did not have to tell him to modify the behavior; he just knew he had a responsibility based on who he was working with and trying to help. “I talked about it with the staff here, and they talked with me about it like an adult. I wasn’t told what to do, or even really persuaded to do anything. I was able to talk my thoughts through, and come to the decision I knew I had to make, to be true to what I was trying to do and learn.” (6/6/05).

In his celebration talk, John discussed his academic participation:

I learned the importance of intellectual abilities, and I saw my own abilities. In LA [language arts] I read aloud, I wrote, I was self-motivated. I didn’t do my work because I had to, I didn’t write or volunteer to read because it was easy or to get a grade. I wanted to do it, for the glory of it [laughs] but also on the things I needed help on, needed to learn about. I went up 5 steps from where I was in junior year. I know now I have a love for learning. It was there, probably, buried all along, but [names program] helped bring it out. (6/6/05)

John closed his celebration speech by discussing the change he saw in himself as a learner and community member. He discussed the idea that it was his job to take action towards his own growth, and that it was schools’ job to give him the opportunity to do so (“the tools and experiences to try and use them” 6/6/05). He discussed how the job of the teacher is to be the guide, to offer the chance, the experience, the strategies, but that the role of the learner was to take the action necessary to grow and learn.

I grew, I had great, amazing experiences, I partied (laughter), I had fun, and I learned that I won’t let others hold me down. I know my opinion of me is what counts and that I can learn and do just about anything that I want to, that I act on, and I am ready. (6/6/05)

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CHAPTER VII

CHRIS

The third composite, Chris, represents the smallest group of participants. These students seemed to enroll in the PAEP for a combination of reasons. There was boredom at their home school, “nothing to offer me there” (9/9/04), “I was completely bored, completely disengaged” (9/11/04), “a total waste of my time” (9/14/04). Another reason for enrolling that was indicated was the hope to, “Meet new people and have a lot of fun” (9/10/04). Furthermore, students in this composite, while interested in seeing how the program would unfold, seemed to hold the enthusiasm of the other students in mild, veiled disapproval, “I don’t think [PAEP] is going to be a life changing event. I think it is going to be way better than [district school], but I’m not like everyone else here. I know it’s going to be lame, sometimes. It has to be” (9/10/04).

Connections and Community

At a focus group towards the end of the year participants discussed their initial connections to and perceptions of the program. Chris had an interesting perspective on his early experience:

I didn’t want to expect too much. It felt very corny and I just couldn’t buy into it. It was like, I was watching a made for tv movie. All these totally different people who didn’t know each other at all, coming together and forming this utopia. I didn’t trust it. And I mean, it was fun, the staff were cool, I did the activities and stuff, but I sort of just kept watching and waiting to see what was really going on. (5/18/05)

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This highlights what was evidenced throughout the year: Chris remained watchful and partially removed from the program. There were certain aspects/components of the program that Chris eagerly engaged in, but more often than not, he held a skeptical view of the community. There was evidence that he wanted to "be a part," and that he wanted to believe in the vision of the program, but for the larger part of the year, he held himself on the periphery. Interestingly enough, his peers seemed to respect his ability to view situations from the outside, and thus often turned to him and included him without any apparent effort on his part. As will be discussed in the next section, Chris reported to spend a good deal of time in school prior to the PAEP "getting by" and in a conversation about community midyear, he expressed similar sentiments:

I think it is sort of funny that the more I act like I don't care, the more a part of this everyone makes me. Not that I think it is all about me. I know it isn't, but it just seems like it kills some of them [staff and students] to think I am not all in. Sometimes I just want to say, "C'mon guys, wake up. This isn't the real world." Like, it's a great program, way better than regular school, but in a lot of ways it is the same. I still can get away with not working. I still know how to get by. I know a lot of these people would never be friends in regular school. It's like a cult, and they [staff] have themselves and us brainwashed. It isn't a bad thing they have us thinking, you know, all focused on the good and on building each other up, pursuing our dreams, working towards goals, being a part of something. Yeah it's all good, but I can't help feel like it's a load of c--- at times. (12/18/04)

Chris told me that his "natural skepticism was totally confirmed" (11/29/04) by something that occurred after the first wilderness experience. The students signed an agreement relating to the behaviors they agreed to commit to during the wilderness experiences. After the wilderness experience the students participated in a private town meeting (students only) to discuss whether agreements were broken. In this
meeting, one student admitted to breaking the agreement. When the student told the staff, the student was suspended.

The program director asked the facilitators of the meeting if there was anything else the class wanted to report. There was not. Then the program director discussed a few things with the students that Chris later discussed with me. The first thing the program director mentioned was that the staff knew there were more kids than the one who came forward who broke the agreements. Next, he indicated that the staff assumption was that the students had the opportunity to discuss the agreement, and so regardless of what the students thought, the staff assumed that the agreements were not signed under coercion. He went on to indicate that the agreements are not a loose thing: they must be adhered to. However, he added, “I know there are other broken agreements, but I’m not going to take this any further” (10/6/04). He finished by thanking those that kept the agreements and indicating that if any of them wanted to admit to breaking the agreements, they could go to his office or that of the school social worker.

When Chris and I later discussed this incident he had very strong feelings. The first thing he indicated was that, “It was total b------t, what [program director] said” (11/29/04). When I asked him to elaborate, he first indicted that the agreements have to be signed or the students cannot participate in the wilderness experiences. “And you have to do that, both because we all need the gym credit, and because it is fun. It’s a huge part of the program” (11/29/04). Chris indicates here that he understands the wilderness experiences are integral to community building, and that he wanted to be a part of them. At the same time, he was frustrated by what he saw.
as “total coercion, forget about what [program director] said” (11/29/04). He further said that the fact that the staff claimed to know others broke the agreement, but only punished the one who came forward

seems like the exact opposite of justice. And how could that build us up as a community? I mean, if anything, it divides the staff and students, not brings us together the way the trip itself did. It just makes me question them all the more, their honesty. Because I don’t think they do know, and the integrity, because how is this fair? (11/29/04)

He struggled throughout the year to decide whether he “believed” in the community, whether the staff were really a part of it, and how much he wanted to invest in it (5/18/05).

Chris often pointed out to his peers and me inconsistencies between the philosophy that staff presented and the actual goings on. In relation to teaching and learning, he once commented:

It’s great that we are all part of this community, but notice that [staff] still won’t teach unless everyone is silent and looking at her. And we could pick our projects, as long as she approved them. And [staff] still has the ultimate say on whether your writing is acceptable. I mean, if it is a free choice piece, who are they to tell us if we conveyed our ideas well? Even in the first academics with science, [staff’s] class was great, but pretty much all a lecture. I mean, it was totally interesting, but how is that different from what we have done for 12 years? (3/29/05)

He also noted contradictions between the staff’s statements of ecological responsibility and their actual daily practices:

Did you ever notice what they drive? Half of them have SUVs, which are not good for the environment. And even the fact that they buy coffee or drinks in bottles, or string cheese. All of that packaging. It is easy to spout off the philosophy, to make us feel like we ought to be all Woodstock, but you have to look at what people do. I am not saying they are not better than most, but [staff] can get so righteous. (4/4/05)
While Chris often had such discussions with me, and at times with his peers, at no time did I witness or hear him voicing these views to the staff members. When I discussed this with him, he indicated that he still thought the program was better than his district school and that the staff were "way truer to their philosophy than any other adults I know" (4/13/05). In the second half of the year, Chris explained what he saw as the difference between the PAEP and his district school:

I don't buy anything 100%. There is always an agenda, a reason, for everything that everyone does. That doesn't mean I think [PAEP] is a bunch of b------t. It's great. But you can't tell me that they [staff] just want to help us "be all we can be." They want to mold us as much as our families and [district schools] do. It's just that their mold allows us a little more freedom than the others. (3/7/05)

During the preparation for his celebration talk, Chris took his reflection periods quite seriously. In his talk, he discussed how he did not take full advantage of what was offered to him until the end of the year. He discussed how he kept looking for the faults, and how in April, he realized that just as it had been in his district school, "I was not fooling them, I was fooling me" (6/1/05). Three separate times in the talk, he mentioned that he did not "trust" the program until the last month and a half of the year: "It really took me that long to be convinced, but once I did, once I realized I really needed to, and could, and should, I committed myself to myself, which is what I think the program is really all about" (6/1/05). He discussed how there were things that went on that he did not agree with, but that he was never denied the chance to discuss them, and he never felt unheard.

In discussing the evolution of the community, Chris indicated that there is a "natural destiny" for the students to be joined together "because we are all misfits in one way or another, and so we can relate at least on that" (5/18/05). He further went
on to say that this made it easy to start building community, and that the orientation further helped those relationships along. He then discussed the way he felt this impacted on the overall experience:

So the deck is loaded. We are bound to become a group. That sets the groundwork for the rest of the year. The staff said all the time how this [PAEP] is so different from [district schools]. They treat us like adults; they trust us; they offer these opportunities. You feel privileged, man. So when it was time to do things you didn’t want to, or were afraid of, or whatever, you first owed yourself, because you know they are all into the goals and showing us we can do anything. Then, if that didn’t work, you felt you owed it to the staff, because they are so open and helpful. If you don’t care about that, there’s everyone else [students] rooting and pushing you on or looking at you like a freak for not getting on board. Good, bad, or otherwise, the community is powerful. (5/18/05)

Chris illustrates here the potential impact a community of peers can have on a given students participation.

Perceptions of School and Role of Learners

Where in my life am I ever going to need 95% of what I learned in school? Nowhere. At least here, the stuff is interesting. Except on the wilderness trips here, I’ll probably never need to know how to make a fire again, but I can if I have to. And I know I won’t visit the pueblo in reality, but it was cool to learn about how Native Americans lived and why they hold certain practices. (11/28/04)

Similar comments supported Chris’ perception that school and life were naturally disconnected, “What about school prepares you? They tell you what to do, how to do it, where to do it, when to do it. It prepares you to be a robot” (3/7/05).

Chris’ reasons for not connecting initially to the community were tied closely with his perceptions about schooling and his ideas about the role of learners. He initially attempted to remain distant from the program, not expecting too much from it, displaying a sense of disregard. This seemed to be based on his preconceived notions about school, “I’m going to just wait it out. Why would I think so much more is
going to happen here? It’s still a school, I still have to go to school, no matter how many of us there are or how many ways they try to make it cool” (9/20/04). This comment, and others like it, highlights the perception Chris had of school as being a place that he had to be, not that he chose to be. It is also evident from these comments that Chris felt disappointment in his previous experiences with school and was not willing [at least initially] to actively join into the PAEP experience. He remained watchful for large stretches of the program.

Chris spent much of the first half of the year commenting on how his prior experiences in school made him “very jaded about the point of school. It’s a big babysitting service provided by Uncle Sam; that’s really it” (9/14/04) When probed on comments like this, Chris often indicated that he “never learned anything of value” (9/14/04), “couldn’t imagine that my teachers really thought what they taught mattered in the real world” (10/6/04), and that “the bottom line is that you don’t really learn anything you need in life until you get to college, grad school even” (10/6/04). This attitude indicated that Chris felt real school started after 12th grade.

Chris’ participation in classes vacillated between active participation and attention, and disconnection. It seemed directly connected to the value he saw the class as having in terms of connecting to what he deemed the “real world” (the world outside of schooling). He often actively participated in the elective classes (NAS in particular). While the science class that the program director facilitated in the first term was largely conducted in lecture format, Chris displayed active engagement by taking notes, asking questions, and discussing the material outside of class. When
asked about his participation in these classes compared to the others, he offered an interesting perspective of the role of schooling:

These are two classes that I feel everyone should take. The science class is scary; there is so much that we take for granted and so many ways we can fix what we are ruining, you know, the planet. Stuff I never knew or would have thought of, but so simple. It just needed to be pointed out. He [program director] makes it interesting, not just because he is so into it, but because he constantly gives us real life examples and reasons why it has to change. And he lets us ask all the questions we have. It’s like no stone unturned. It’s the same in NAS. You learn about all this stuff that the old cultures did, do. Stuff that just makes sense: respecting the planet, each other, really seeing the world and living in and of it. Why can’t they teach that in regular school? No, there you learn a bunch of stuff that totally doesn’t teach you how to really be in the world. (3/14/04)

It is clear from this comment and those like it that Chris felt school should connect concretely to the concept of being in the “real world” (which generally indicated life outside of school). He felt strongly that his pre-PAEP experiences in school were “an object lesson in idiocy: all theory and no practical application to the next 60 years of my life” (11/29/04). Because school was so disconnected from real life in his mind, he did not feel he needed to take an active role in learning what was being taught. When he entered the PAEP and experienced classes that he felt would prepare him for the “real world” (like the science and NAS classes), he began to become more actively engaged as a learner. “I don’t feel like these classes are being done to me. They are here for me, I can learn something that matters here” (11/29/04).

Chris described much of his pre-PAEP experience in school as a “dance in the art of getting by” (9/9/04). He felt school was designed to “create conformists” (9/14/04) and that he learned to “play the game in order to remain relatively hassle free” (9/14/04). When probed about this, he articulated instances where he would
willingly agree with the "outrageous comments of my teachers, and go along with idiotic conversations, just to get a good grade" (9/14/04). Chris felt school was "done to me, not for me" (10/6/04).

Early in the year we discussed his confusion about what he was supposed to do in school (both in prior experience and at the PAEP):

It is never easy to know what you are supposed to do. In fact, it's so confusing that it doesn't make sense to try and figure it out. Some teachers want you to talk, others want you to be quiet. Sometimes you are allowed to disagree, others you get in trouble. You have to switch mindsets every day, at least six times, for six different classes, and you can't even base how you will act on the prior day in a given class. If the teacher is having a bad day, so are you. It is totally done to you, and you basically are at the whim of the school. Here, it is a little better. You know you can behave in certain ways because the staff is pretty stable, and they are all on the same page. I think here you have more of a chance to learn when you want to, because the program is pretty much set up as an independent study. Even the classes we all have to take, we are allowed to learn about stuff in those areas that we are interested in. That makes me a little more interested. It helps me to stick to it a little more. (10/18/04)

This perception of his previous experiences in school led to his idea that he needed to take a skeptical stance towards schooling. In this skepticism, he saw himself as above and on the outside of schooling. His saw his role in school (pre-PAEP) as, "keeping them [faculty] happy while preventing myself from becoming indoctrinated with their simplistic views of the world" (10/18/04).

Chris was often unprepared for class. During one work study, about halfway through the year, he and a staff member discussed his lack of preparation. The staff member indicated that Chris had some bad habits (like coming unprepared to class) that would not serve him well during his internship. Following is the interaction that took place (1/19/05):
Chris: I won’t write at my internship. No, I don’t always not have a pen. Ok, so I don’t have a pen here ever, and maybe in [names another class] but here I can use the computers, and [staff facilitator of other class] is a, she’s different. And the class bores me.

Staff: Ah, we can’t blame others for our own failings, Christopher. I don’t like everything I have to do, but I have some things I work towards, and that makes me pay attention to the little things, like being prepared. They show if you care or not.

Chris: It’s funny, I give a damn, but you could never tell by my actions. Maybe I give a damn on an outside level, but I enjoy being irresponsible too much inside, or maybe that it’s just easier? Maybe I am really good at being irresponsible? [laughter].

At this point, the two sit down and the staff member begins to help Chris go through what he needs for the class. Chris then seems to reflect on his lack of preparation.

Chris: I wonder how much of my life I am going to spend seeing how much potential I have?
Staff: What do you mean?
Chris [to me]: Do you understand? Like, did you spend time feeling like you knew you could do better, but just didn’t?
Researcher: At times, I guess.
Staff: Me too. Did you ever stop to think about the real reasons for this?
Chris: I’m cynical.
Staff: Easy way out, man. One word answers don’t really get at the meat of life’s big questions.
Chris: If you were going to analyze me, you might say I was afraid of failure, but I can do that: fail, so I am obviously not afraid of it [laughs]. Maybe I don’t really see the point of a lot of the requirements? Like the pen. Someone here will have one, and if not, someone on staff will get me one. It is kind of irrelevant where I get the pen from. It’s only important that I have one. Ya see?
Staff: But what if you get stuck somewhere without one? Then what?
Chris: Then I’m screwed [laughs].

Later that day Chris told me that he understood what the staff member was getting at but that he really did not see a fair connection between being unprepared for school and for real life experiences like the internship. He indicated that he would have a pen at his internship, but that if he did not, he doubted that the people he would be working with would see him as irresponsible. He stated that the real world
"does not care if you have a pen, only that you do your job well" (1/19/05). This is another example of Chris seeming to bide his time in the program until the more valuable "real world" components occurred. These components actually mattered to him, and for them, he was more generally attentive and responsible.

During the preparation for his celebration talk, Chris openly shared that he had a different experience from his peers. He discussed his early cynicism, "I just couldn't trust that the program was all it was made out to be. I had 12 years of being let down in school already; that's a lot to fight against!" (6/2/05) Furthermore, Chris indicated that he might have gotten more out of the PAEP if he invested himself differently in the program, "I can't blame anyone but me. If [names several students] all got so much out of it, and I didn't, all you have to do to understand why is look what they put into it" (6/2/05). In his talk, he expressed that the feeling that he did not take full advantage of what the PAEP had to offer: "I took no advantage of [PAEP], but I don’t regret it now. I did only the work that was required of me. It was just like, I was just like I was at my old school" (6/5/05). He also discussed in a focus group that he did not trust the program to be what the staff claimed it was until very late in the year, and that he felt that the program presented us with the opportunity to change ourselves. I saw a need and had a desire to change. That's why I came here, but I didn’t take advantage of the chance to change. I didn’t start my change, not until the very end, but once I did, once I realized I really needed to and could and should, committed myself to myself, which is what the program is really about, I think. (5/17/05)

It is important to elucidate that by the end of the year, Chris felt connected to the community and expressed a sense that he had control over his destiny:

I have started to stare down the challenges and the vices I have at home and
in my life. By the time we reached [Wilderness Experience II], I threw myself to the wind. I was a part of it: nature, my patrol, the program; I gave it my all! I have learned, but it has been a long lesson. 6/5/05
CHAPTER VIII
DISCUSSION, HYPOTHESES, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study describes and analyzes the experiences and perceptions of high school seniors during their year long, voluntary participation in a progressive alternative learning program (PAEP). The focus was on the social and academic experiences the students had, and the things that they learned from these encounters. The study site is a PAEP that is, at its pedagogical core, spiraling learning: participants’ experiences in the earlier components build on their participation in the later components. Accordingly, this study took place throughout the school year, as it was important to observe the participants’ experiences over the course of the program.

The following questions helped to guide this qualitative, hypothesis generating study:

1. What are the contexts in which students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
2. What do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
3. How do students in a progressive alternative learning program learn?
4. Why do students in a progressive alternative learning program make the decisions and choices they make?
Discussion and Summary of Findings

This study attempted to examine how, why, and what students in a PAEP learn. The findings of this study are explored in terms of theories about cognition and motivation as they relate to the context of the learning environments of the PAEP, the ways and things participants learned, the choices participants made in regards to learning and doing (and the factors that motivated these). After this exploration, the hypotheses generated by this study will be presented. Finally, implications for classroom practice and areas of potential further study will be explored.

Contexts

The theoretical rationale described learning as a sociocultural event, indicating that our minds are embedded within the society we are a part of (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Gardner, J.W., 1991; Gee, 2000; Heath, 1983, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). The structure and philosophy of the PAEP studied is manifest in a variety of contexts.

Learning in the PAEP resulted directly and indirectly from the sociocultural interactions students had. A growing awareness of social structures is an important product of learning, and such awareness furthers one’s cognitive growth of how to be, learn, grow, and react in the world. The staff attempted to use the time students spent on the campus of the PAEP, whether in structured classes or in less formal groupings, as a continual movement towards students’ growing awareness of their impact “in and on the world” (program director, 9/14/04).

Within the first week of the program, students were learning how to interact with and rely on each other through a variety of activities that were designed as
“games” (see Table 5). As students got to know each other, their self- and group-identity began to form. These identities were central contexts to their academic and social learning through the year. They were the “mental space” from where the students operated: “I am __________, which I define as __________. I am a part of this group (PAEP), and we see the world in this way __________” (Sascha, 6/2/05).

Within these contexts, the students went through the program.

The orientation period was followed by the first wilderness experience. Students came back from this week-long adventure with a myriad of stories about what they learned physically, emotionally, and socially. They made direct connections to the experiences in the orientation period, and even began to look ahead as to how the struggles in the wilderness might help them to succeed in the coming challenge environments. One students offered great insight into the way the different contexts were building on each other:

Before we took that trip, I couldn’t imagine how I was going to make phone calls to get an internship. I still don’t see how I can, I am way too shy, but if my patrol could get me to climb that mountain, I guess they’ll figure out how to get me to make those calls! (John, 10/6/04)

Students began to see a breaking down of the walls that they had constructed over the years between “school learning” and “life experience.” This will be further discussed in a following section, but is relevant in terms of the contexts in which students learned because it indicates that students were experiencing learning in contexts other than what they perceived as “school.” Indeed, the world became the classroom for many of the participants in the PAEP.

The “world as classroom” context is a key element in the program’s philosophical underpinnings. Each challenge area is designed to connect to the “real
world," to give experiences that will help students have a better understanding of who they are and how they can find success beyond the walls of the school. The applied academics allow students the opportunity to learn about things that are directly relevant to their program of study (e.g. resume writing, networking), their perceptions of the world (e.g. constructing written pieces for language arts that reflect on their experiences, participating in NAS discussions about the culture they come from and that they live in), and their understanding of what they need in order to be adults in society (e.g.: balancing a checkbook, time management). These classroom experiences facilitated the acquisition of skills and experiences students needed in other areas of the program. Then, as they entered the other challenge areas, (community service, internship) they gained skills that further assisted them in the academic classes when they returned to the school. This spiraling of curriculum is supported by the theories of Bandura (1986, 1997) and Glasser (1990).

Each component of the program is designed to place students in an active role, where choices and behavior rest on the student. The classroom experiences rely on the students' socio-cultural interactions (activities in all challenge areas as well as their private lives) to support the reasons for why they are learning what they are learning. Thus, a “world as classroom” context is established.

How and What Do They Learn?

This study began with an exploration of Dewey's (1897) belief that learners learn best when they are active participants in society. According to this philosophy, learners who see a connection between school and their successful participation in society are motivated to assimilate the knowledge gained in school to their existing
schemata. The theoretical rationale further put forth that today, as in Dewey’s time, we cannot assume to know what the future holds in terms of career paths for students (what they will pursue). What we do know are some of the various communicative events students will need to participate in: network building, gathering information, constructing and carrying out plans. Therefore, an appropriate role of education may be to target these skills and help foster them.

Fostering such skills speaks directly to Bandura’s (1986) idea regarding the three inter-related components that impact on a learner’s motivation (self-efficacy, goals of learning, judgment of usefulness of task). In American education particularly, this theory is quintessential in terms of high school seniors. If students feel their academic learning does not fit their goals nor has useful application, they will most likely disengage from the task.

Most of the students were disengaged in the academic programs of their district schools, and because of word of mouth and the way the program was presented to them in the spring of their junior year, they believed they would have a different experience in the PAEP. This is the reason most students ended up enrolling in the PAEP. Most of the students seemed to have experienced education designed with a behaviorist’s approach; it was an act being done to them. The most cited reason for enrolling related to wanting a chance to “do something.” The students felt a lack of authenticity in their academic experiences. Many students felt the opportunity to join a program that promised “applied academics” (the description being that the academics would be directly related to the “real world”) was exactly what they needed. When locus of control for learning and doing shifted onto them,
when they had power and responsibility to determine their paths (as compared to their perceptions of their district school experience), most welcomed and seemed to rise to the challenge.

The classes and activities that students seemed most engaged in were classes that they felt related directly to their lives. At the PAEP, students commented that, for example, the environmental science class, where they learned how their daily lives impacted in a myriad of ways on the earth, or the social studies class where they learned to write resumes and conduct interviews, were directly related to other aspects of the their lives as they prepared for college, employment, adulthood. Additionally, in the classes where they learned time-management (health) and about checking/savings accounts and taxes (economics), they were actively engaged in questioning the material/teachers and in note taking. Upon reflection, many students indicated that they would not have believed the level of their own willing participation in these classes.

Along with the explicit and obvious application of the curriculum to the students' goals, the spiral nature of the program helped to foster students' self-efficacy. Each component of the program builds upon the next, and the work demands grew increasingly more challenging. Therefore, in the orientation, students learned about each other and how to rely on each other through community building games and lessons, so that in the first wilderness experience where they must rely on each other for survival, they have practiced the skills previously. Likewise, in preparation for the internship, students first participate in a community service/service learning project where they can "get their feet wet" in terms of being a part of
a profession. Furthermore, after the internship, students indicated that the work during first block of applied academics in social studies they developed functional resumes and practiced their interviewing/communication skills which turned out to be necessary components in gaining a successful internship. They indicated that successful internships were ones where they wanted to be, and where they felt empowered to pursue a chosen activity and course of learning. The students indicated that they were given the skills and necessary practice in prior challenge environments, and then tested their skills in the next challenge area. The spiral context of the program meets the three components of Bandura’s (1986, 1997) triad for learning: the goals are set by the students with the staff (attaining an internship, college acceptance, employment of their choice), they are given specific instruction and explicit explanation of how the tasks will facilitate their goal attainment (usefulness of tasks), and they are given the chance to build their learning through practice and spiral learning experiences (thus building a stronger sense of self-efficacy).

Why Do Students Make the Choices They Make?

Within the first week of the program, students were learning how to interact and rely on each other through a variety of activities that were designed as “games” (see Table 5). As students got to know each other, their self- and group- identity began to form. These identities were central contexts to their academic and social learning through the year. This study found that when students felt a connection, a sense of belonging, they were more likely to display a commitment and resiliency towards the tasks at hand, tasks that often seemed insurmountable to students prior to the PAEP experience. Students reported once they felt connected to the community,
there developed an obligation to engage in the program for both the benefit to self and to others. This was evident throughout the program, and examples include the following:

1. students who reported being habitually late or habitually missing classes in their district schools reported making conscious efforts to attend all PAEP classes,
2. students who reported rarely completing assignments in district schools reported completing work in PAEP classes in order to participate and “help” others,
3. students indicated they put added effort into assignments they knew would be used as models for other students (language arts pieces they would be reading to peers, science presentations, etc.),
4. students who were successful in completing components of projects assisted their peers in achieving similar success (e.g.: students who carried extra weight on camping trips by lightening the gear of a struggling peer, when an internship was attained peers helped each other with moral and practical support in terms of networking, mock phone calling, etc., giving up independent/free time to edit the work of peers).

These acts, while altruistic in tone, served not only to “lighten the load” of another, but were seen by the students as “investments in good karma. In the next challenge, I might be the one who needs an assist” (12/18/04).

Students also reported becoming committed to their own goals and ideologies over the course of the program year, and cited different reasons and ways of being committed. One student indicated she moved from being a vegetarian to being a vegan because she realized that “being committed to an idea means being willing to
make sacrifices. It is pretty easy to give up meat, but if I am really committing to the idea of animal rights, I need to give it all of my effort, not just for the easy parts” (Sascha, 11/28/04). Another example can be seen in a students’ rationale for selecting a college to attend that in the short term presented serious financial and emotional concerns: “I am afraid to be away from everyone, all the way across the country! But this is the best school I got into for my field. As hard as it will be to go out there, and to get and pay the loans, I need to look at the big picture. I really want to learn as much as I can, and everyone in this field says this is the school to do it at” (John, 4/14/05).

There were many such examples of students making choices based on a larger picture than that which served immediate goals. During the last focus group, the participants discussed the change in their perspectives and how the change impacted on the choices they made:

S1: I think that maybe I have a more open point of view, you know? That’s why it is easier to make choices that I don’t really want to make. I can see why they are the better choice, even if they are not what I want right now.

Researcher: What do you think caused this change in perspective?
S1: I’m not too sure. I mean, it is partly that we just had the chance this year to really think about our goals, you know, what we really want.
S2: Yeah and then we had all of these chances to see that doing what you don’t want to now can sometimes really help you get what you want late.
S1: Yeah, like the phone calls. I so didn’t want to do that, but if I didn’t, how would I get into the field [relating to internship experience]?
S3: Even the work here. I didn’t want to keep rewriting that resume that we talked about last time, but I knew that not just the internship needed it. I knew I needed to work this summer and that it would help with the colleges I wanted to get into. So, I had to keep working on it until it was right. It didn’t matter to me at the time like hanging out did, but I guess I understood in the long run, it mattered more than hanging out, you know?
As stated above, students began to understand that the "real world" was already where they lived, not some abstract time and place in the future. This real world became their classroom, as stated above, and their becoming cognizant of the fact had direct impact on the ways in which they interacted in the world: the choices they made. Students in the NAS class reported, almost daily, they were better able to navigate experiences and encounters outside of the classroom because of the activities in the NAS class. The philosophy of the class (as defined by one of the student's in a reflection piece) was:

\[
\text{to get a better understanding of the world and the people in it. It shows us to see things through the perspective of 'others' in the effort to have a greater understanding of the connectedness of things, and to show us how to walk more gently and respectfully on the earth and through our lives. (John, 1/19/05)}
\]

Many of the students who participated in this class indicated that the way they interacted in the world was changed by what they learned in this class. They believed they were more open mind to people and philosophies that were foreign or that they formally disagreed with, and even attempted to help the people in their lives outside of the PAEP to broaden their awareness. Whether it was sharing kernels of corn during Thanksgiving break, discussing the essence of a salt pilgrimage, or exploring personal walkabouts and solo's (all aborigine experiences discussed in the NAS class), students reported using the world as their classroom, and beginning to see themselves as both student and instructor.

This awareness of their own ability to add value to the world, to instruct, inform, produce, and create, produced a shift in the paradigm many students had of
the purpose of learning and school. In preparation for her celebration, one student articulated her philosophy:

Learning, school, and the world aren’t separate. It’s all a part of the same thing. Teachers and students aren’t separate. We’re all teachers and all students. We learn from everything and from everyone. It seems obvious now, but it took the whole year to learn it. Maybe it took all year to unlearn the last 12? Anyway, now, going to college, I am not as intimidated as I would have been a year ago. Not only am I a year older, but I am a lifetime wiser. I have the secret, and I want to share it with everyone: it isn’t a game, it isn’t practice: this is real life, and it always has been. Everything counts, it all matters, and each moment is a new chance to learn, to make a difference. I always felt I couldn’t wait to see what the future held. Now I see I never had to. (Sascha, 6/2/05)

What About “Chris”? 

The program did not have the same impact on all of the students. The students who made up the Chris component are integral to the findings of the study. All of the seniors in the PAEP completed the school year and graduated from the program (and their respective district schools), however, what they learned and how they accomplished this goal (of graduating) varied, particularly in terms of Chris. As one student in an early focus group put it, “We’re going to get out of it what we put into it” (4/13/04). Towards the end of the study, most students moved from a Chris perspective to a John perspective (see Table 4), but, as the leading participant in the Chris composite indicated in a discussion at the end of the year, “There were some hard learned lessons on the road here!” (6/2/05).

Two of the students who are characterized as “Chris” types voiced disappointment in the way the internship component turned out for them. Neither student felt like they really accomplished much, both in comparison to their peers and in terms of their own expectations. In separate conversations at the end of the year,
we discussed this. One student indicated that he felt the program staff ought to have
done more to facilitate his acquisition of an appropriate internship; "He [staff
member] saw I wasn’t happy there. I think he should have done more to help me out
of the situation. I was stuck" (5/10/05), whereas the other student took responsibility
for the situation; "I didn’t really pursue what I wanted to because it seemed too hard
to get into the field. So I just ended up doing something that was ok, but not really
anything I want for a career. That’s on me though, they [staff] totally encouraged me
to try and come up with other ideas or another plan. I just sort of flaked, I guess”
(5/10/05).

Piaget (1972) discusses how the participation of the learner is central to
learning; knowledge cannot be given verbally, but must be constructed and
reconstructed by the learner in accordance to what is already known. For learners to
understand and create knowledge of the world, they must have experience and then,
based on what is known, act on something. It is the action which supplies
understanding of what is acted upon (Sigel & Cocking, 1977). The first student had a
knowledge base wherein “adults” intervene when students flounder and thus expected
a staff member to resolve his problem. The second student has gained the perspective
that he is responsible for his progress, or lack thereof. According to Ryan and Deci
(2000), motivation occurs when people are moved to do. In these terms, the second
student is on the path towards self-liberation. The awareness that it is his
responsibility to affect the changes in his life that he wants to see indicate knowledge
of the value behind an internal locus of control, self-directed goals, self-efficacy, and
resiliency, thus the movement towards action towards one’s own growth.
Generated Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been generated from this year long-study of high school seniors in a PAEP:

1. Learners who perceive their academic courses as being pertinent to their personal goals are more likely to persist in the achievement of these goals.

2. When students explicitly connect classroom experiences and “real world” experiences, student motivation is enhanced and understanding is greatly aided. When these connections are unclear or disregarded, students may disengage from academic studies.

3. Students who are disengaged from academic studies may be reengaged when participating in a community that they see as valid and valuable. Students who are engaged in academic studies may find deeper cognitive and motivational connections if they connect to an active and engaged community of learners.

4. Giving opportunities to develop personal goals, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, and resiliency requires allowing students to direct their own path, and, at times, to make mistakes.

Hypothesis 1

*Learners who perceive their academic courses as being pertinent to their personal goals are more likely to persist in the achievement of these goals.*

Learners who are allowed to establish academic goals that have relevance to their personal goals tend to be more committed to achieving both sets of goals. This may be contributed to by a variety of factors already established in research on
motivation. Learners who create their own goals may feel an internal sense (locus) of control, as well as feel a sense of investment towards achieving their goals. The participants in this study spent significant class and individual time establishing short and long term goals that connected their academic and personal lives. The components of the program that incorporated “real world” experiences (all the challenge areas beyond the applied academics) offered participants the opportunity to hone their goals and practice the skills needed to accomplish their long term personal goals (completing high school, getting into college or field of choice).

Learners who are unclear about “what they want” (i.e.: their long and short term personal goals) may have difficulty connecting to any academic goals. A portion of the participants in the study struggled to determine what it was they ultimately wanted to achieve, either personally or academically. These students had great difficulty meeting academic goals set by either themselves or the staff.

**Hypothesis 2**

*When students explicitly connect classroom experiences and “real world” experiences, student motivation is enhanced and understanding is greatly aided.*

*When these connections are unclear or disregarded, students may disengage from academic studies.*

Individuals come to classroom environments with unique experiences and understandings of the world. While there are inevitable points of cross reference between individual experiences, the total established schemata of an individual is unique to that person, thus his or her understanding of what learning is, why one must learn, and how learning ought to connect to life can be viewed as unique. Dewey
(1897) tells us that “the child’s own instincts and powers furnish the materials and give the starting point for all education” (p. 77).

When educators allow teaching and learning to stem from students’ existing schemata, and when they incorporate said schemata, students, at the very least, can see connections between what they already understand and the knowledge they are attempting to acquire. Teachers who facilitate explicit connections between the activity in a given learning module and students’ personal or academic goals assist students in seeing the relevance in their lives of what is being learned. The participants in this study were actively engaged in resume writing and mock interviews. They discussed this in a focus group, explaining that knowing what was coming up in the next challenge area, and understanding how it connected to what they were currently doing motivated them to do the work to the best of their ability.

Support for this hypothesis can be seen in the overwhelming expression of the participants in this study that they saw "why" things were taught and worked on in the PAEP. Students reported that the staff attempted to make explicit the connection between what was being taught and how it would be used. They also continually pointed out how each component of the program assisted students in succeeding in the next. By doing this, and by allowing students to bring in their own ideas of how things were connected, the staff created an environment of spirally applied learning: where learning, doing, and achieving existed in a symbiotic relationship.

**Hypothesis 3**

*Students who are disengaged from academic studies may be reengaged when participating in a community that they see as valid and valuable. Students who are*
engaged in academic studies may find deeper cognitive and motivational connections if they connect to an active and engaged community of learners.

Students who report being disengaged from academia may be reconnected to learning if they are able to make connections with others. Being a part of a community of learners has a powerful impact on many factors that influence motivation towards learning. In a community of learners, where students feel a part of the group (safe), there is the opportunity to examine what is being learned and to question it in ways that one cannot accomplish alone. This communicative aspect of learning may assist students in re-engaging with academia. Furthermore, such group affiliation is aided when the teachers are a part of the community of learners as opposed to outside of it. This fits with Badura’s (1986) social learning theory, wherein learners observe and interact with people (teachers, staff, mentors) who model particular behaviors. When learners understand the model exhibits what they (learner) values, they are motivated to learn from and practice what was modeled. From these observations, learners construct their understanding of the environment.

In the community established over the course of this study, adults and adolescents worked together to build the community. The role of facilitator shifted according to the task at hand. This assisted the learners in developing an awareness of their own abilities (when they had expertise in an area, they were encouraged to become the facilitator, to model the desired behavior), which contributed to their sense of efficacy.
Hypothesis 4

Giving opportunities to develop personal goals, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, and resiliency requires allowing students to direct their own path, and, at times, to make mistakes.

Aiding the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a major function of secondary schooling. In order to become successful, productive, indeed even happy, members of larger society, the traits of self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, and resiliency are all relevant aspirations. Furthermore, a sense of personal goals, things to work towards (whether they stem from materialistic, socio-emotional, cognitive, or any other realm), provide purpose and focus for the abovementioned traits, as well as for being.

Adults (teachers, family, coaches, mentors, etcetera) who are connected to adolescents often try to direct them on paths that they (adults) believe are best for the young person. This direction may be based on the adult’s own experiences, their beliefs about what will best serve the adolescent, their ideas about how the young person ought to live their lives, or a myriad of other factors. Regardless of the motivation of these adults, they often inadvertently stifle the adolescent’s true growth towards adulthood. This is not to imply that adults ought to abandon opportunities for influencing adolescents. Students may be encouraged to establish both short and long term goals. They should be assisted in developing appropriate plans to carry out these goals, and may be encouraged to consider how their actions directly impact their course.
The participants in the study were given the framework for what was expected of them. Within that framework, they were encouraged to establish personal goals. Thus, one student who hoped to enter the field of psychology set the goal for his internship to work in a hospital, not as a clerk, but with patients was encouraged to pursue the goal, while being made aware of the legal and ethical issues that might create roadblocks towards his goal. This student did in fact face quite a few roadblocks, but was ultimately very successful in achieving his goal. His resilience towards the task came in part from the fact that the staff did not discourage his pursuit, only acknowledged that it would be hard. He was not told it could not be done, therefore, in his understanding, it could.

There were participants in the study who at times did not seem to be succeeding in terms of the goals they set out for themselves, or the expectations that were articulated by the staff. During the study, students reported (and I observed) that they were encouraged by the staff to continually reflect on their goals and their aspirations, and to consider how their actions were impacting on the attainment of their goals. The staff did not intervene by forcing students to stay after school, or by making the necessary phone calls to procure a project (internship or community service). For students to develop the traits of self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, and resilience, students need opportunities to struggle through these periods.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Traditional classroom practices that are the hallmark of American education need to be revisited in light of what we have learned in this study and over the last 40 years regarding cognition and motivation. While practices such as rote
memorization, five-paragraph essay format, and lectures have their place in the halls of learning, students benefit from having responsibility, along with being given strategies for acquiring, and instruction in, the skills needed to function responsibly as adults in society.

Today’s student is deeply entrenched in the world: a plethora of multimedia sources fire vast amounts of information at us, pressure to achieve higher academic goals is ever increasing, and the need for a competitive edge in both college acceptance and the job market becomes more and more prominent (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this fast-paced society, there seems little time or place for wonder. But that is the essence of self directed learning: a wonder, a puzzlement, a question begging to be explored. How can educators reengage students’ sense of wonder? What is needed to reconnect the material outcomes of a good education (entry to college, a financially productive and socially contributive career) to the personally fulfilling outcomes of said education?

In part, it is essential that students have the opportunity to examine what it is they want (both short- and long-term goals), and what path they will choose to achieve those goals. As the participants in this study indicate, some students believe they have been handicapped by traditional educational practices. This is particularly detrimental for secondary school students preparing to become full adult members in society. It is crucial to teach students how to set goals and action plans to meet these goals. The findings of this study revealed students need both well-intended goals and a clear plan of action, for the goals to be realized.
Another crucial component of education is the social connection students experience in their learning community. While community building is often a part of elementary- and middle-school education, secondary schools rarely seem to spend time developing these relationships (Raywid, 1981, 1994, 1999a & b; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Tapper, 2002; Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Yet, if we are preparing students to enter society, a society of people that are increasingly more interdependent on one another (Coles, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2002), it seems imperative to create a community that represents a microcosm of the larger interdependent society. Teachers might prepare students to become active participants in society by giving them explicit instruction and experiences in doing so. Creating close knit communities of learners is essentially good scaffolding for secondary students as they prepare for adulthood and their entry into “the real world.”

In addition to building communities of learners and allowing students to set goals and plans of action, educators should monitor the progress students have in attaining goals and participating in the community. While there is a need for students to determine their path, and making mistakes along the way, this does not imply that educators should not ever intervene. One way to sponsor this development is to pair learners with trained mentors; optimally, adults who share similar goals, who help guide the learner along their journey.

Allowing students the chance to set goals and to develop an understanding of how to achieve them, through building their sense of efficacy, resiliency, and awareness of their internal locus of control, as well as though developing a sense of commitment towards community, may assist students in their evolution towards...
adulthood. Providing a mentor, or guide on the path may help to smooth the transition even further. All of this may provide scaffolds to help students become fully embedded and productive, mind and spirit, in adult society (Bandura, 1977; Gardner, J.W., 1991; Heath, 1983, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Implications for PAEP

While the previous section articulates information that could be helpful for all academic programs (traditional and PAEP), this study also has implications for PAEP in particular. The first implication was articulated in the examination of the progress “Chris” experienced through the program. PAEP are often highly successful in reengaging students in their learning, and the margin of students in Chris’ position is quite small, but his existence indicates once more that “one size does not fit all”. Student like “Chris” need positive, enriching educational experiences every bit as much as the rest of our children. Throughout the program, it took much longer for “Chris” to “catch on to the whole school thing” (Chris, 6/2/05). The implication this offers is that is that when such students (resistant to many measures) are encountered, there is still the need to continue to find ways to reach out to them. It is important to note, while it may seem obvious, that much of the benefit of educational experiences do not manifest during the program year they are implemented. Thus, staff of PAEP ought to continue to strive towards connecting with the students who seem resistant to both mainstream and alternative educational practices. This leads to the second implication for PAEP. Students are on their own, individual and unique, learning paths. The very premise of PAEP supports this point of view, however, as stated above, the high rate of success may influence practitioner to expect similar results
from student to student and from year to year. The students in this program year, while able to be compartmentalized into three general composites, were tremendously varied and changing in their abilities, beliefs, motivation levels, and perspectives. Furthermore from year to year, there will be minor and major adjustments of social mindsets, attitudes, and perspectives (as one student indicated in a reference to the perspective, attitudes, and actions of the PAEP participants in the year 9/11 occurred). PAEP curriculum, approach and staff all need to be flexible in allowing the students to learn, grow, and exist within the larger society; to struggle with becoming full members in said culture, and to try to determine what their role in that current society will be. While there should be a general framework for inquiry, and for the structure of PAEP, "prepackaging" of curriculum, ideas, and practice does not facilitate successful PAEP.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study used a case-study approach and utilized procedures consistent with ethnographic research to generate hypotheses in regard to social and academic learning in a progressive alternative education program (PAEP). The dearth of research available on many aspects of progressive alternative education programs (PAEP), combined with the hypotheses generated here, indicate several areas for further research.

Additional research in the long term affects of participation in secondary PAEP could help current practitioners to refine the programs they design and implement. There is almost no research on the impact of such programs (perhaps in part because of their relative newness in the field). While this study hypothesizes that
there are positive impacts of said programs, empirical evidence has yet to be identified.

We also need to empirically test the hypothesis of allowing students to direct their learning and to make mistakes. Documenting specific paths students pursue related to their goals can help to inform the field in how students learn strategies to achieve their goals.

Another important area to study would be a comparison of high school seniors in district schools to those in PAEP such as the one in this study. Documenting the evolution of these two groups throughout their senior year could help to identify how much, if any, of the findings in this study were a result of, or were correlated with, the maturing that occurs in adolescents in their senior year of high school.

Finally, as this study examined students who self-selected entry into the PAEP, it might be productive to study comparison programs with progressive alternative approaches wherein students are mandated to attend, as well as in district school settings that take a progressive approach (versus a traditional approach) but serve all students in the community (as opposed to selecting a specific population, as the study discussed here did). The former could inform us as to the impact of student choice of progressive alternative education settings on their overall goal setting, efficacy, resiliency, and sense of control. The later can provide pertinent information regarding long-term impacts on the lives of individuals who experience progressive approaches to education.


Appendix A: Informed Consent (3 letters: Student/Researcher, Parent/Guardian, and School/Staff)

Student-Researcher Agreement

The researcher is a New York State certified teacher. She is working on a doctoral degree at Fordham University. This agreement concerns research for her dissertation study. The student might not be asked to participate in every part of the study.

We agree to the following:

Data collection:
The researcher will observe and talk with students during regular school days. Survey(s) will be done during regular school hours. The other data collection will take place during lunch or after school. The student will have input as to when such meetings will occur (allowing for advance notice at home/work). No one session will last over 60 minutes.

Surveys, focus groups, interviews:
The student will be asked to describe her or his experiences with school, work, goals, and motivation. From these descriptions, the researcher will create the next set of questions. The goal of the questions is to note the experiences that have shaped the student’s beliefs and approach towards achievement.

Interviews will be tape recorded. After each interview, the researcher will examine the notes and a transcript of the interview for patterns and themes. These results may be shared with the student in order to make certain the accuracy of the data.

Confidentiality:
Pseudonyms will be used to ensure privacy. The school will not have access to individual student input. Nothing the student tells the interviewer will be available for use by the school.

The student can withdraw from the project at any time during the school year. If the student has questions, they can contact anyone listed below.

- The researcher (914-497-2813).
- The researcher’s supervisor, Dr. Rita Brause of Fordham University (212-636-6447).
- Dr. Lee Badger of Fordham University’s Institutional Review Board (212-636-7074).
- The school’s administrator has given permission for the researcher to conduct this research, and may also be contacted.

Student Signature:_________________________________Date:____________
Researcher Signature:_______________________________Date:____________

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Parent/ Guardian Permission

To the Parent(s) or Guardian(s) of ______________________ (“your student”):

I am a New York State certified teacher. I am also working on my doctorate in education at Fordham University. I am conducting a research project on the students in Walkabout. This study will examine student views of motivation and output. The research includes observation, informal discussion, surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The purpose of this letter is to inform you about this project and to ask for your permission to allow your student to participate. Only students who want to participate will be included in the study. The study will be done as follows.

Data collection:
The researcher will observe and talk with students during regular school days. Survey(s) will be done during regular school hours. The other data collection will take place during lunch or after school. The student will have input as to when such meetings will occur (allowing for advance notice at home/work). No one session will last over 60 minutes.

Surveys, focus groups, interviews:
The student will be asked to describe her or his experiences with school, work, goals, and motivation. From these descriptions, the researcher will create the next set of questions. The goal of the questions is to note the experiences that have shaped the student’s beliefs and approach towards achievement. Interviews will be tape recorded. After each interview, the researcher will examine the notes and a transcript of the interview for patterns and themes. These results may be shared with the student in order to make certain the accuracy of the data.

Confidentiality:
Pseudonyms will be used to ensure privacy. The school will not have access to individual student input. Nothing the student tells the interviewer will be available for use by the school. Your student will sign a student-researcher agreement. This will show that she/he understand what the study is about. It also indicates that she/he agrees to take part in the study, if you agree (copy attached).

The student can withdraw from the project at any time during the school year. If the student has questions, they can contact anyone listed below.

- The researcher (914-497-2813).
- The researcher’s supervisor, Dr. Rita Brause of Fordham University (212-636-6447).
- Dr. Lee Badger of Fordham University’s Institutional Review Board (212-636-7074).
- The school’s administrator (program director) has given permission for the researcher to conduct this research, and may also be contacted (school’s number-omitted).

If you agree to allow your student to participate in the study, please sign the permission statement below and return it to me.

Thank you.

Yours truly,

Christina M. Occhiogrossi

[Signature]

I, ____________________________, give permission for my child, ____________________________ to take part in the research described in the above letter. I have read the agreement between my child and Ms. Occhiogrossi.

Parent/ Guardian Signature ____________________________ Date ____________________________

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
School/Staff Permission

To the staff at (PAEP name omitted):

I am a New York State certified teacher. I am also working on my doctorate in education at Fordham University. I am conducting a research project on the students in Walkabout. This study will examine student views of motivation and output. The research includes observation, informal discussion, surveys, interviews, and focus groups. I will be observing the students during the times when you will be working with them. This includes class time, presentations, and the various challenge environments. I understand that all curriculum materials I observe are owned by B.O.C.E.S. of (B.O.C.E.S. consortium omitted). I will not share any of these materials with other school districts.

The study will be done as follows.

Data collection:
The researcher will observe and talk with students during regular school days. Survey(s) will be done during regular school hours. The other data collection will take place during lunch or after school. The student will have input as to when such meetings will occur (allowing for advance notice at home/ work). No one session will last over 60 minutes.

Surveys, focus groups, interviews:
The students will be asked to describe their experiences with school, work, goals, and motivation. From these descriptions, the researcher will create the next set of questions. The goal of the questions is to note the experiences that have shaped the student’s beliefs and approach towards achievement. Interviews will be tape recorded. After each interview, the researcher will examine the notes and a transcript of the interview for patterns and themes. These results may be shared with the students in order to make certain the accuracy of the data.

Confidentiality:
Pseudonyms will be used to ensure privacy. The school will not have access to individual student input. Nothing the student tells the interviewer will be available for use by the school.

A copy of the Student- Researcher Agreement and the Parent/ Guardian Permission letter has been attached for your review.

The students can withdraw from the project at any time during the school year. If the student has questions, they can contact anyone listed below.

- The researcher (914-497-2813).
- The researcher’s supervisor, Dr. Rita Brause of Fordham University (212-636-6447).
- Dr. Lee Badger of Fordham University’s Institutional Review Board (212-636-7074).
- The school’s administrator, (program director), has given permission for the researcher to conduct this research, and may also be contacted (school’s number omitted).

If you agree to allow me to collect data through observing your work with the students, please sign the permission statement below and return it to me as soon as possible. Thank you for your assistance.

Yours truly,

Christina M. Occhiogrossi

I, ____________________________________________, give permission for Christina M. Occhiogrossi to observe my work with the students of the (PAEP Name omitted) this year as part of her data collection. I have read the attached agreements find the conditions outlined acceptable.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Staff Member Signature                      Date
APPENDIX B

SAMPLE OF DAILY NOTE TRANSCRIPTION INTO ONE NOTE
Appendix B: Sample of Daily Notes Transcription into OneNote

Daily Notes (Template)
Thursday, November 04, 2004
3:41 PM

As I came in... there are a lot fewer folks here... but when I went too big room – the
day now starts @ 8:30!!!
V is in room w/ me as I write notes... humming and writing on board.
J and S come in chatting about home... - K
gives me permission slip
As T takes attendance, there are soooo many Ss not here...
New and goods- Ke saw supersize me (as
recc. By many folks here) and then went to
have a big mac
Me "the chicken show" - Co knows “the
natural history of the chicken”
A lot of Ss are late and are not here

I asked Mx and Eli re: pre-visits and she
tells me that it is when N meets with you
before present to make sure you have
everything and after to discuss how you did.

Record/examine N&G in Biz meeting.

Personal Notes:
Co knowing the chicken show I saw, and the many Ss that agreed is interesting... Ss are as varied in their
TV habits as they are everything else

NEXT STEPS
How do Ss who are late get addressed?
Ask N about pre visits

Ss have to account for their time... is the
lateness etc. related to testing boundaries?
How are N&G impacting on "establishing
community?"
APPENDIX C

SURVEY SUBMITTED TO STUDENT PARTICIPANTS FOR

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Appendix C: Survey Submitted to Student Participants for Background Information

(Survey included lines for writing – removed here.)

Directions: Please review all of the questions before you begin. You may choose to answer all of the questions, or only some, but please provide as much detail as possible. If you need anything explained, please ask me. If you need more room to write, just indicate on new sheet which question is being continued. If you do not complete the survey in the time we have today, you may choose to complete it at home or simply turn in what you complete at the end of the session. The information you provide here is confidential. I ask for your names here only to help will be used to structure the next portion of my research on your perceptions, motivation, and productivity. Thanks so much!!!

-Tina

I. Experiences prior to (program name): The goal of these questions is to understand your feelings about school prior to (program name), why you felt this way, and what experiences may have contributed to these feelings/ideas.

   a. Describe your school experiences prior to (program name).
      i. What did you do in school?
         ____________________________________________________________________
      ii. How would you describe yourself as a student? Why? ______________________
      iii. What experiences stand out over the years (good, bad, or otherwise)? ______
      iv. What influenced you to get things done (academically or otherwise)? ______
      v. Were there things that you felt were missing from your school? If so, please describe. ______

   b. Describe your attitudes and beliefs about school prior to (program name).
      i. How did you feel about going to school? (Likes/dislikes/indifference.) Why? ______
      ii. Do you feel that you "got" anything out of school? Please explain. ________________

II. The (program name) experience

   a. What were the reasons you decided to apply for the program? ____________________________
   b. What was the process of getting into (program name) like for you? ________________
   c. Before you arrived, what did you expect of and at (program name)? (Academically, socially, experientially?) ______
   d. As orientation began, what were your initial impressions of:
      i. The program? _____________________________________________________________
      ii. The staff? _______________________________________________________________
      iii. Your peers? _____________________________________________________________
   e. How does the program meet your expectations so far? Any surprises? Please explain. __________
   f. Now that you have gone through Orientation, WE1, and CS:
      i. Have you learned anything? (If so, please describe briefly what you have learned and how.)
      ii. Have you accomplished anything? (If so, describe briefly what you have learned and how.)
      iii. What goals have you set for the rest of the year? (General and/or specific.) __________
      iv. Why have you selected these goals? ___________________________________________
APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP START UP QUESTIONS
Appendix D: Focus Group Start Up Questions

The questions here have evolved from what I have read in your surveys and observed so far. Feel free to go off these topics if there is something else you think is relevant or important to discuss.

**Pre Program:**
1. Many of you indicated that you just were not into your classes – what would or could have made you more into it?
2. In different ways, I have heard that you felt your growth and creativity was restricted at your district schools. Could you explain what that means? How? What was the impact on you?
3. I hear many of you talking about beating the old system… what does that mean? In what ways did you beat it? Why did you do this? What did it feel like?
4. Every survey indicated that you each wanted to **do** something – what? How did you know?

**@ Program:**
5. At home school, getting up early seemed to be a big problem, but here – WE, AA1&2, CS, INT. is early too? What is the difference?
6. Are there differences between the teachers here and at your home school? What are they? What is the impact of the differences on you as students?
7. Are there similarities between the teachers here and at your home school? What are they? What is the impact of the similarities on you as students?
8. What are you learning about this year?
9. Is what you are learning here different from what you learned at home school? Please explain.
10. Is how you are learning here different from what you learned at home school? Please explain.
   1. What is the “practical” learning? The academic?
   2. What makes the learning worthy?
   i. Academic? Examples?
   iii. Social? Examples?
   iv. Life? Examples?
11. There are so many opportunities **to do** offered here. How do you decide? What influences the decisions?

**The BIG Picture:**
12. Do you see any changes in:
   i. Your academic self?
   ii. Your social self?
   iii. Your goals?
   iv. Your drive?
   v. What you think about?
   vi. How you view the world?
   vii. How you view your place in the world?
   If so, please explain them, and why you think the changes occurred.